E. Aster Bunnymund is used to everything good, everything he cares about, being ripped from him.

Jack Frost thinks its a horrible thing to be used to, and vows to fix that.
A chill rain drooled down out of the sky; the clouds looked low enough to be caught on the highest tree branches, and brooded over the hills and valleys. He wasn’t one to attribute emotions to the weather, but there seemed to be a grim determination in the dark puffs of water vapour. They were not about to move. There was no thunder, no wind, and the miserable, steady leak wasn’t going to stop. Certainly not before sunset.

Aster wouldn’t usually stay out in this kind of weather, but he had his reasons. He’d let his yearly visit to - his parents would understand, they were the understanding type, but he’d still let himself get delayed, and distracted, and… no. He wouldn’t let the weather drive him off, when he was already a good two, almost three months late.

He plodded down one shallow hillside, mud squelching underfoot as he went. At the base, he paused long enough to give his shoulders a quick shake. It didn’t dry him out any, but it got rid of the annoying tickles at the back of his neck.

There were a few hardy birds out and about, despite the wet, but otherwise it was quiet. All the rest of the animals, large and small, were doing what they could to shelter from the weather. Aster sympathized with them; only an amphibian would find all the water pleasant, and only a ‘civilized’ idiot would be wandering around in it.

Aster… didn’t know where he stood, anymore. He’d been one of the civilized, once. A ways back. Smart coat, four walls and a roof, glasses to compensate for a touch of hyperopia. Books and science and music. He might not’ve comported himself like one of the Pookan Brotherhood, but he wouldn’t have shamed anyone with his deportment.

Now, though…

He sighed, again, and shook more water out of his fur. These visits with his parents always made him dwell about everything he wasn’t, anymore. And he couldn’t help but think his mother would’ve cried to see how far he’d fallen. His father… would’ve made a stupid vow or other, vengeance on everyone who’d slighted his son, but his father had been a bit of a chivalrous idiot.

The little memorial was just over the next hill. It was lower than the one he’d just descended, but the ground was looser. He slipped and fell to one knee, his hands sinking up to the wrist in mud. It was cold and slimy and clung to his fur. Aster scowled, but the water would wash him mostly clean, given enough time.

He crested the hill, and then froze, like a rabbit in the path of an oncoming truck. The - his memorial - his parents’ memorial -

Aster scrambled down the side of the hill, and stumbled to the heavy tracks crossing the valley. The tree, the rocks - gone.

There were a few splinters, a handful of torn up roots, but - gone.

All gone.

The first sob caught him by surprise. The second hurt, like the act alone had bruised his ribs. The
third snapped something, deep inside, and then he was wailing like a baby, howling and cursing and screaming, tears and rain soaking his face. Mud splashed around his fists, up onto his chest and shoulders, into his mouth and eyes, but he didn’t care.

Gone. All gone.


The energy ran out of him, carried away by the rain. He slumped to his hands and knees, and then curled up on his side in the mud. The cold hurt. It didn’t matter. Gone. All gone. His fault. Let him freeze.

A bird pecked at his cheek, and flew off when he waved a hand. He wasn’t dead. He wasn’t going to die. He never did. He just wanted to be left alone.

Time passed; he didn’t care. It didn’t bother him. He’d slept away centuries, after all. Bad of him. Lazy. Not like a Pookan Warrior. Not like any sort of Pooka at all. More like a lazy Earth rabbit. Shaming his ancestors…

The rain slowed to a miserable drizzle. And footsteps squelched, coming closer. Aster clenched his eyes tighter closed, and curled up a little more, until his nose was pressed against his knees. His back ached. His nose was all stuffy and clogged from the crying. The footsteps continued to squelch closer.

He didn’t care.

He didn’t.

He…

"Oh, Bunny," a familiar voice said, and sighed. Gentle hands, big and warm, wrapped around his shoulder. "What have you done to yourself?"

"… Go ‘way…"

Another sigh, and one hand shifted, reaching down into the mud to cradle his skull. "Not a chance. C’mon. Let’s get you up, somewhere warm."

Aster shoved at the hands, but there was no strength to it. He knew, he knew, but he didn’t want to know, so he didn’t. The person lifted him up, until he was standing halfway under his own power, halfway propped up on the person’s shoulder.

No! He didn’t - not this person. Not now, with grief pouring from him, with his eyes glued closed and mud caking his fur. With this person he had to be the Easter Bunny, strong and brave and confident. He couldn’t falter. He couldn’t fall.

He’d fallen.

Things… blurred. They traveled, but Aster couldn’t have said how far, or… Walking or being carried or flying. He didn’t know. He didn’t care.

Gone. His parents’ shrine was gone. His fault. Should’ve been more careful. Should’ve visited more often. Should’ve visited on time. Then he’d have known. He’d have done something. But he hadn’t, because he’d been lazy. Forgotten.
His next clear moment... was so completely different from curling up in the mud next to his parents’ shrine that he was... shocked. A dull shock, but it sparked a hint of interest, so he lifted his head and paid attention.

He was sitting in a large, comfortable chair. It was made out of heavy wood, that looked rough but someone had sanded it as smooth as glass, so smooth that Aster rubbed the pads of his fingers against one chair arm just because it felt so nice. The cushions, just a bit overstuffed, cradled his tired and sore body to perfection, so that he couldn’t help but relax into the plush embrace.

A woolen blanket was wrapped over his shoulders, warm and a little scratchy through his fur. Someone had knit it by hand; he could see the faint signs where someone had dropped a stitch, and come back to fix it. The colors weren’t anything inspired, just the natural, undyed shades of dull white, black, and a dark brown, all spun together, but it was... nice.

There was a second chair, with a second blanket, on the other side of the... he was sitting in front of a fireplace. There was even a fire going. How had he not noticed?

Between the two chairs was a small table, just as ‘roughly’ made. There was a mug of tea, still hot enough the liquid steamed, and a small plate of thick biscuits. Aster’s stomach clenched, but was well mannered enough not to growl.

Since it was there, he picked up the mug of tea, and took a careful sniff. And then remembered that his nose was stuffed up after the crying. Somehow, the tea helped anyways, and he could feel himself start to breathe easier. The heat sank into his fingers, and when he carefully sipped at the drink, warmth pooled in his stomach all out of proportion for what he’d ingested.

He looked around as he sipped, becoming both curious and confused. He had no idea where he was. Someone’s sitting room, in front of a masterfully made fireplace. The fireplace alone was enough to make his eyes widen; it had been made out of what was clearly river rocks, the smallest of which was the same size as his two clenched fists. The mortar between was just as obviously clay, fired hard after months - years? Decades? Centuries? Longer? - of fires. The little apron around the base of the fireplace was made out of paving stones, mottled in shades between that of the clay and the river rocks. The mantle was a huge plank, thicker than Aster’s hand, and stretching not just the length of the fireplace - which was large enough to roast North in, or so it looked - but the length of the room. Books, shiny stones polished as thoroughly as the chairs and table, a few baskets with scraps of yarn or cloth spilling over the sides, and a handful of worn stuffed animals had been distributed along the mantle.

The outer walls seemed to have been made out of entire logs. They were matched in sizes, from where he was sitting, at least two feet in diameter on average. Moss, mud, and more clay had been packed into any chinks, stopping drafts in their tracks. There were two windows beside the fireplace, one to either side, and they must have been carved into the walls with an ax. He twisted to check the wall behind, and saw two more windows, and a door opposite the fireplace.

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There were only two internal walls, from what he could see. Both were made out of thick planks, probably cut from the same trees that provided the logs for the exterior. The door to his left was closed, while to his right there wasn’t a door, just an open arch that was twice as wide as any of the doors. The floor in what he was already thinking of as the main room was made out of more planks, planed and sanded smooth, while the room through the archway seemed to be done with paving stones.

The kitchen?

 Everywhere he looked, he saw a level of skill and care that made him feel humbled. If he’d woken in
a building made this well, but out of stone, he’d have suspected he was a guest of the dwarves. If the walls and furniture had been made out of living plants, elves. A log cabin out of human history, perfected as only a spirit could… no idea.

"Hey there," a far, far too familiar voice said. "You’re awake."

Aster turned towards the probably-kitchen doorway, and his ears fell back in dismay. "Jack," he said, voice rough. He sipped a bit more at the tea.

Jack leaned sideways against the doorway, one arm up and temple resting almost against his wrist. "You’re looking better," he said, his expression undecipherable. His voice was warm and welcoming, though, and his body language relaxed. "What happened, Bunny? You were soaked clear through, and heading for hypothermia."

"Wasn’t," Aster immediately denied. "Takes more than a bit of cold."

Jack snorted. "Trust me. Hypothermia. Maybe it’d have been mild, but your fur wasn’t doing anything but hold onto the water. Was it a fight?"

Aster looked down and away. "No."

Jack shoved away from the doorway, and walked almost soundlessly across the room. He crouched down at Aster’s knee, looking very odd without his staff and with his sleeves rolled up to the elbow. "Bunny? Something happened."

"None of your business," Aster snapped. His grip tightened on the delicate china cup, and the inevitable happened. The cup shattered, and hot tea splashed over his lap, and up into Jack’s face. Aster yelped and flung the blanket off his lap, and then thought better of it and grabbed it back up, lifting a dry corner up to wipe the tea off the winter spirit. Who was… laughing? Aster paused, and then scowled.

"What’s so funny?"

Jack lifted his head, tea running down his cheeks in rivulets. Sort of running, that is. The tea seemed to have turned into slush. "Here," Jack said, and wiped his face off with the blanket. "Sit down. I’ll get you a new mug."

Jack would? Aster sat, his burst of energy dying away, and sighed. Jack draped the second blanket around his shoulders, and tucked the ends in close.

"I’m not going to drop it," Jack warned. "Friend of mine curled up in a fetal position… bad. Friend of mine curled up in a fetal position in the cold mud… Someone’s going to get it."

Aster looked up. "We’re friends?"

"I thought we were."

Were they? If only for something to do with his hands, he picked up a biscuit. It was light and fluffy, and if it wasn’t steaming when he broke it open, it still tasted good when he took a nibble. Well. Better than mere good. Like the rest of this little cabin, the biscuit seemed to have been perfected.

But… were the two of them, he and Jack, friends? He didn’t know. Their relationship… He’d have said… He didn’t know. Not enemies anymore, but not friends, either. But… would he have called anyone his friend? Of everyone he knew, he saw the other Guardians the most, and until last Easter,
he could have counted their meetings in the last decade on one hand, with fingers left over. You were supposed to see your friends more than that, weren’t you? And miss them when you didn’t see them?

Aster didn’t. Oh, sometimes he got a yen for company, but nothing very specific. And he never felt like going out and interacting with strangers. Even when there’d been other Pooka around, he’d preferred his own company…

Was there something wrong with him? Jack called them friends, but Aster couldn’t say the same. And he knew, the same way he knew all hundred-and-fifty verses of El-Ahrairah’s Enemies, that North, Tooth, and Sandy would name him a friend as well. But he couldn’t do the same.

There must have been something wrong with him, something broken. Something that kept him feeling anything for anyone, until it was too late and they died. Because oh yes, he could feel for them then! For his parents, and his siblings, and his fellow warriors, but for the living? For Tooth and North and Sandy, for Nightlight and Katherine, Manny and Jack? Apparently not.

Jack approached, his bare feet padding on the wooden floor. He had a heavy mug in one hand, and another china cup in the other.

"Here," he said, and offered the mug to Aster. "I sweetened it with honey. The hives produced more than I expected, last year, so now I’m looking for ways to get rid of it."

Aster shook his head, and took the mug. "You talk like…"

"Like?" Jack asked. He curled up in the second chair, bare feet tucked against the chair arm. His toes curled against the cushion, digging in and flexing against the fabric. "Like I live here, maybe? Like I’ve got a couple beehives in the yard?" Aster nodded, and Jack chuckled. "I’ve got a hen house, too. No pigs, though. Chickens hate me, so I don’t feel too bad eating one for dinner."

Aster stared into his mug. "You made… all this?"

"Or bartered. But it felt right. Felt necessary." He saw Jack shrug, from the corner of his eye. "And from everything I’ve seen, people live in homes and animals…"

Aster flinched, and clutched the mug to his chest. Sturdy clay, it held.

"Bunny?"

"Figure I’m an animal, Frostbite?" he asked, doing his best to sound cheerful, despite the lump in his throat. "I don’t live in a home."

"You have your Warren," Jack said, his voice… gentle. It hurt. Aster blinked hard against the stinging in his eyes, and shook his head.

"Workplace. Not a home. I kip there, sometimes. In the fields."

"You don’t have anywhere with a bed?" Jack asked, still in that horrible, quiet, gentle voice. "Nowhere to cook your meals?"

"I used to." He gulped his tea. The burning on his tongue helped; his chest still ached, but at least he could breathe. "Atlantis. Or, well, what people these days call Atlantis. Got the place mixed up with that philosopher’s dream city…"

"It was an island, right?" Jack asked. "Or am I getting that mixed up with Plato’s stuff?"
Plato, right. Annoying bloke who couldn’t hold his wine. "No, that part’s the same. Island sank, too, and that was the same. Wasn’t humans living there, though, so that was different. Some myths call my… what used to be my home… Lyonesse. That’s not right either."

"Fabled perfect city of the Greeks, and the mythical last resting place of King Arthur," Jack mused, and sipped his tea. He paused, and frowned at Aster. "Why do so many myths deal with islands sinking?"

Aster was startled into a laugh, or as close to one as he could come. He wheezed, and stared at Jack. "Wot?"

"Atlantis," Jack said, and began ticking the names off on his fingers. "Lyonesse, Avalon, Buyan, Cantre’r Gawelod, Dilmun, Lemuria… Yees? Yis?"

"Ker-Is," Aster said. "That’s the pronunciation I heard first."

"Ker-Is," Jack repeated, and nodded. "Okay. And there’s probably more I can’t remember off the top of my head. What’s with that?"

Aster swallowed, and looked down into his mug again. "Memory. Oral history, guess is how it’d be put. People knew us, and told stories about…" His breath shuddered in his throat. "The island was called Mu. It was in the Atlantic Ocean. According to the stories, the people of Egypt, Mesoamerica were from there…" He waved one hand. "The survivors spread out. Not a lot. Not…"

He swallowed. Jack reached across and rested one hand on the chair arm, next to Aster’s elbow. "You don’t have to…"

He’d started. If he didn’t finish the tale, it’d linger in his dreams. "D’you know much about the Celestials, Jack?"

"Uh…” The winter spirit sat back in his chair, nose wrinkled as he thought. "They sound like those flying skeletal horses from Harry Potter? Thestrals?"


"Good guy, good guy, walking black hole, scary lady, someone I am currently ignoring in favour of finding a way to the moon and whacking him a good one with my stick of doom."

"… Right." Aster set his mug down, the better to rub at his forehead with both hands. "Right. So, you didn’t know we are all aliens?"

Jack’s silence somehow managed to contain a level of glee normally demonstrated by small children and large amounts of candy. "Aliens?" he asked, sounding casual.

"Aliens," Aster confirmed. "Pitch is - was - a Celestial. Mother Nature, whatever name she’s going by now -"

"Dubbie," Jack said.

"What?"

"Mother Nature, the name she’s going by now. Dubbie."

Aster blinked. And blinked again. "Why?"
Jack shrugged. "Why not?"

"Right. Well." Aster picked up his mug of tea again. "She used to be a Celestial. Manny too." No need to go into details; Celestial covered all of the human-appearing beings of the Golden Age, kind of like how ‘dog’ covered everything from a Mastiff to a Yorkie.

"Sandy?"

"I’ve never been too clear on if he was a star pilot… or the star itself," Aster admitted. "One of those things no one was ever too clear on, and I think he keeps changing his answer."

Jack gaped at him. "Sandy’s a star?"

"Maybe?"

"Huh." The winter spirit seemed to think that over. "Explains a lot. So… aliens. You’re not a Celestial?"

"Pooka." He swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Anyways, uh. Well, everything kind of… Pitch, he… It’s all gone. Our home planets. It’s not even a black hole, or mess of rubble, just… shadows." Strewth, but he’d gone and gotten stinking drunk when he’d first heard rumour of NASA finding that old patch. It’d taken a week to sober up, but the hangover had distracted him nicely. "Survivors kind of gathered here. A few, at least."

"And lived on this island, Mu," Jack said.

"It was artificial. How it sank so quickly, vanished completely. It… It wasn’t home," he admitted. "Everyone was plenty raw, even the kiddies that’d been born on Earth. And I’m the only Pooka that ended up on Earth. Everyone else could blend in, if they’d wanted."

It’d been the Stone Age, so no one had really wanted. Bunch of civilized people, who wore woven cloth and ate food that’d been properly cooked and spiced, mingle with people who had only just gotten the hang of wrapping tanned hides around their bodies and tying them on? Who burnt their food over a fire and ate it half raw?

"But you had a place there," Jack said, clearly thinking out loud. "Friends. Belongings. Stuff you could call your own."

"Yeah." Aster cleared his throat. "Then Pitch… Humans were just figuring out agriculture. Going from nomadic to settled. He got through our defenses, and…"

"Kerplunk, she sunk, to the bottom of the sea?" Jack held up his hands when Aster glared at him. "It’s from a song. About the Titanic. Which, despite rumour, I had nothing to do with."

"Protesting before being accused makes you look guilty."

"Everyone accuses me of the Titanic," Jack muttered darkly. "Everyone. I was on the other side of the country. I found out three weeks later from a newspaper."

Aster rolled his eyes. "Fine. I believe you." He ignored Jack’s shocked look, which quickly morphed into delight. "And yes. Mu sunk. We evacuated, but… it went down fast."

"And it’s hard to fish people out of the ocean," Jack agreed. "Hard to see them, if you can’t fly." He sounded like he’d had experience with that.
"Are you *sure* -?"

"I’m sure I didn’t have anything to do with the Titanic!" Jack threw his hands up. "Trust me, when I sink a ship, there aren’t any survivors!"

Aster choked on his tea. "What?"

Jack’s eyes glittered, hard as ice and twice as cold. "People committing crimes in international waters shouldn’t be surprised if they get into trouble. Especially those kinds of crimes."

Then he blinked, and was just Jack again, friendly and enthusiastic as a puppy. Although the puppy was looking sympathetic. "So you haven’t had a home since Mu?"

"Easter Island. Don’t laugh!" Aster glared, until Jack visibly bit down on his lips and nodded. "Place got wrecked in another fight with Pitch."

Jack rolled his eyes and muttered something about… glaciers, and ropes, and Aster supposed he really didn’t need to hear the details. "So, not since Easter Island?"

"No." He felt cold, despite the wool and the tea. "A home… you lower your guard in one, yeah? And it’s become clear to me that I can’t. I need to be ready for anything, at any time. And -"

Jack waited, but when it became clear that Aster wasn’t going to continue, he leaned forward again. "And… something about animals. You flinched, when I mentioned animals and homes."

"Animals don’t need them," Aster murmured. "A den, maybe, but that’s easily made and easier abandoned."

Jack nodded, and set his empty cup on the side table. "But you’re not an animal," he said, as easily as saying fire was hot. "So you need a home. You can stay in mine, if you like. I have to check on dinner."

He paused, beside Aster’s chair, and tweaked the blanket over the Pooka’s shoulders. "We’ll talk more, later, Bunny… But think about my offer, okay?"

Chapter End Notes

For the Islands referenced in the fic:

- Ys (pronounced /ˈiːs/ EESS), also spelled Is or Kêr-Is in Breton, and Ville d’Ys in French (kêr means city in Breton), is a mythical city that was built on the coast of Brittany and later swallowed by the ocean. Most versions of the legend place the city in the Douarnenez Bay.

- Mu is the name of a suggested lost continent whose concept and name were proposed by 19th-century traveler and writer Augustus Le Plongeon, who claimed that several ancient civilizations, such as those of Egypt and Mesoamerica, were created by refugees from Mu—which he located in the Atlantic Ocean.[1] This concept was popularized and expanded by James Churchward, who asserted that Mu was once located in the Pacific.

I’m going to try blending book canon and movie canon for this fic, but if push comes to shove movie canon will win out. However, per book canon, Bunny used to live on
Easter Island (and before that, Mu), and he wasn't always gray, white, and black-striped but tan and beige. 6'1" would be at the low end of the Pookan height average, according to Joyce, when it should be closer to seven feet if I remember correctly.

This is going to be a very long fic, I will warn you right now.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Warnings: non-sexual nudity

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack peeked into his little oven, and tested the temperature above with his hand. He set another kettle of water on top to boil, and added a stick of firewood. He didn’t cook for people too often; not many people found their way to his cabin, and most of his interactions were out in the world. As much as he liked people, as desperate as he’d always been to socialize, this was his refuge, where he didn’t have to worry so much about what other people were thinking.

Having Bunny here made his gut clench in anxiety, but not his usual nerves when talking with others. Yes, he was desperate not to say the wrong thing, but not for himself. He was desperate because Bunny looked so small and lost in Jack’s sitting room, his eyes so big and confused and sad. God, the sadness. Jack shuddered, and checked on the rest of the food. Dinner was going to be perfect. Good, comforting food. Fresh bread, keeping warm so that it’d steam when they broke off chunks. Butter he’d traded for just that morning, freshly churned and golden as a yellow crayon. The roast was almost ready, there were small iced cakes for dessert, and sweet spring water to drink. He’d already scrubbed the table until it shone, but his fingers twitched to scrub it again.

The kettle began to whistle. Jack wrapped several old rags around his hand, and lifted the kettle off the heat. He paused, and then hung the kettle on the fire spit, angling it so the water would keep warm while they ate. They could have more tea after.

He checked the roast again, and then moved to the doorway. Bunny was staring into the fire like he was trying to decipher the secrets of the universe in the flames, apparently unaware Jack was watching him. Probably for the best. Right now, Bunny was unguarded, too tired to put up a façade. Jack knew what that one was like.

Except he had his home to retreat to when he got tired, when being invisible and disregarded got too much. Or Antarctica, when he got angry. What did Bunny have, he wondered.

Not a home, that much was clear. He’d had three - at least three - homes destroyed by Pitch. No reliable shelter. He had his Warren, but apparently slept there only when he had to. Because if he slept there more than absolutely necessary, it’d become a home, something he couldn’t stand to lose again? Or was there another reason, something behind the despair he’d found Bunny in earlier today? Was it that Bunny didn’t think he deserved a home, for some reason?

Or was it everyone else? Jack was no stranger to the subtle effects of peer pressure. Everyone treated him like a feckless youth, and it’d been easier just to go along with it. Even when he was attending to his duties people figured he was flighty and empty headed, and treated him accordingly.

And now that he had his memories, he could even point to events that had happened in his village. Like… Oh, he couldn’t remember the poor kid’s name now, but the son of the town drunk. He’d been a happy child, helpful, but everyone started treating him like they’d done his father, and he’d turned sullen, unwilling to lend a hand unless there was something in it for him. And he’d started
drinking.

So was that a factor in Bunny’s situation? Even if no one was blatant about it, if no one said "you’re an animal and you should live like one," the subtle could be worse. Tone of voice, expression, the way they angled towards a person or away…

Jack didn’t know, and he didn’t know if his suspicion had anything to do with reality. But - Bunny was his friend. Maybe not a good friend, yet, but they worked together and had fought beside each other, and they agreed about the important things. When Jack had been growing up, that had been grounds for a friendship.

He turned and checked the roast, and nodded. He wrapped both hands in rags, and pulled the pot out of the oven. Then he got the poker and shoved and pulled until the wood broke up into burning coals, which he raked more or less even across the bottom of the oven. He’d started a pie, between putting the roast in and waiting for Bunny to wake up, and he might as well take advantage of an already heated oven. A good wedge of pie and some whipped cream would make for a lovely breakfast.

Jack puttered about, getting the roast out of the pot and onto the serving platter, and arranging the vegetables around it. Everything smelled amazing, and looked better. Jack set out the plates, and got the pitcher of water, the glasses. He set out two thick napkins, and knives and forks. He stepped back, and regarded the display. Well, as long as Bunny didn’t hate roast beef -


"Uh, Bunny?"

The rabbit - no, the Pooka, and he’d have to remember that from now on - looked up. "Yeah?" he asked, none of his usual energy showing.

"Do you eat meat?"

Bunny blinked, and sniffed the air. And then Jack saw his mouth work, just before he swallowed. "Roast beef?" he asked, a bit of emotion finally in his voice. And, thankfully, the emotion sounded like longing.

"Yeah. And it just occurred to me that you might have, I don’t know, moral objections or something…?"

Bunny snorted, and stood up, the blanket draping over him something like a cloak. "I eat meat," he assured Jack. "And it smells good."

Jack sighed with relief. "It honestly didn’t occur to me until just now," he said, and tilted his head in invitation. "C’mon. Food time."

Bunny followed him into the kitchen, and stopped at the sight of the table and its riches. "Jack?" he asked, voice quivering.

"You can sit here," Jack said, and pointed at the chair with the best view out the window. He’d take the spot with the less-best view.

Bunny moved hesitantly from the doorway to the chair, looking around the small room with as much - or even more - wonder than North had. North’s awe had been easy to figure out, having everything to do with the workmanship that had gone into building Jack’s home. Bunny’s was less easy to
decipher, but there was no shadow of grief in his eyes, so Jack let it be. It was probably rude to
psycho-analyze a friend without permission.

"I hope you’re hungry," Jack said, and sat down. Bunny draped the blanket over the back of the
chair, and followed his example. Jack began carving the roast and plating the food, politely ignoring
the way Bunny was studying his cutlery like they were strange instruments of war. It’d probably
been a while. North tended to serve finger food at the meetings, and Tooth normally brought fresh
fruits. Jack had gifted the yeti cooks with a crock of honey, but that was more an ingredient than
something you ate while talking about one’s duties.

His mind tried to wander in inappropriate directions, but he didn’t let it. Instead, he put the plate
down in front of Bunny and started serving himself food.

"Starved," Bunny murmured. He picked up the fork, adjusting his fingers until he looked less
awkward holding it.

Jack nodded, and settled back in his chair. "Do you, uh, have any objections if I take a moment for
grace?"

Bunny squinted at him, before his eyes went wide in realization. "Grace? No, no, go ahead."

The winter spirit grinned, and promptly folded his hands in front of his chest, eyes closed. He’d
gotten back into the habit now that he had his memories again, but… differently from when he’d
been mortal. For one thing, it was all informal instead of an actual prayer, and for another, his
feelings about God and the church had changed. Still, there wasn’t a single part of him that had an
objection towards simply thanking the powers that be for the meal, for his newfound friendships, for
being seen and believed in.

If this time he conveyed a - nothing so complex or thought out as a wish, more like a vague hope -
that Bunny let him help with… anything…

Well, no one would know except him and whatever higher power there was.

He opened his eyes, and smiled at Bunny. The Pooka was frowning at him, thoughtfully Jack
figured, but that was only to be expected.

"Habit," he said, and shrugged. "Anyways, let’s eat, before it all goes cold!"

"Not a fan of cold food?"

"Not if it’s supposed to be warm."

Bunny nodded, and began cutting up his first slice of roast. He was a bit awkward at it, all high,
jabbing elbows and tense muscles, but Jack bit his tongue until he was sure it would bleed to keep
from commenting. Or offering to help. Though the thought of offering to cut Bunny’s food up for
him… and then feed him those tender bites of beef with fork or fingers…

No, bad Jack. And why’d he even thought that, anyways? He didn’t even like guys like that. Or at
least, he didn’t think he did… his memories were no help, no surprise there.

Jack kept his mouth full, and made sure he was smiling whenever Bunny looked over at him. Which,
of course, the Pooka did, with a frequency that was either flattering or worrying. Depended on if
those frequent glances were admiring or fretful.

Bunny didn’t seem the type to… hm. Jack chewed a baby potato thoughtfully, and then swallowed.
How was he to know what ‘type’ Bunny was, or what he was likely to do? Bunny could be depressed, could have social anxiety, could… could have DID or anti-social personality disorder. He could be a loner or one of the most popular spirits in the world. He was an alien, and Jack hadn’t known that. What else didn’t he know?

Everything Jack knew came from infrequent meetings on various Easter Sundays, usually no more than a few minutes of getting yelled at by a stressed Easter Bunny. And more recently, longer - in that the Guardian meetings usually went on for a few hours - times together, as often as once a month. So, for a few hours a month, Jack knew that Bunny - the Easter Bunny, maybe, with his work-face on - was confident, strong, defensive, and liked paint bombs.

What about everyday Bunny, who was sitting across from him now?

Jack realized he’d cleaned his plate, mopping up the beef juices with a chunk of bread. His waistband was a little tight around his stomach, so he dismissed the thought of seconds. Dessert, well… he could always let his belt out a notch. Or two.

The roast had been demolished, with only a few sad, solitary peas showing which dish had held the vegetables. Jack cleared the plates away, waving Bunny back to his seat when the Pooka went to help. Then he pulled out the iced cakes from the pantry, presenting them with a flourish.

"Just the thing to finish the meal off," he pronounced. "Help yourself."

Jack picked up two of the little cakes, and nibbled while Bunny inspected one, and took a careful taste.

… He wasn’t going to laugh. He wasn’t going to so much as notice, the way Bunny’s eyebrows winged up, or how the Pooka promptly ate the little cake in one bite. Jack had taken two, that left eight left, and Bunny looked ready and willing to eat the entire plate.

It’d probably been awhile since he’d had proper sweets.

Bunny hesitated when he was holding his fifth cake. "Eh, do you…?"

"Eat it. If you don’t, I have to - and my stomach might explode." Jack patted his stomach, and grinned.

Bunny ducked his head… and ate the rest of the little cakes.

At that point, Jack was more than ready to sit in front of the fire with his feet toasting, but… dishes. He bundled Bunny back to the sitting room, gave him leave to raid Jack’s miniscule book collection, and went back to the kitchen to clean up.

The pie was done cooking. He pulled it out to cool, and began scrubbing dishes.

Bunny would have to stay here, Jack decided. At least for a little while. At least tonight should be simple enough, but tomorrow… he’d need a plan of… not attack, just evasion…

At least he did his best thinking when washing dishes.

The bed was no orthopedic mattress, but it was more than comfortable enough. Like every other bit of work in this house, the bed was made out of wood, what looked to be rough-carved but was actually a very subtle display of skill and perfection. The box holding the mattress came up to Aster’s knee when he was standing, and was ‘simply’ made out of pine planking, sanded so smooth there
would be no chance of splinters. The headboard, such as it was, had been made out of branches, with the bark peeled and the wood sanded down.

Jack apparently used the branches to hold a number of things, from a small candle holder skillfully secured to one sturdy limb, to a dreamcatcher, to a *nightcap*.

An actual, honest to goodness, floppy bit of cloth, *nightcap*. Aster stared at that bit just a little bit longer than he should have, but…

Well. Jack wore a nightcap. Who knew?

He shook his head, and carefully stripped off his kit. His bandolier was hung over a branch, one that stretched out to the side of the bed, where it’d be out of the way. His bracers and leg wraps went on the small nightstand, beside an oil lamp with an empty oil reservoir. That… was it, really. Everything else to his name was in the Warren, where… where it would stay safe.

Aster’s sigh was just a touch shaky, but he was too tired to get much worked up about anything, now. It’d been… a long day. The chance to curl up somewhere warm and dry, and just sleep…

He’d offered to head out, but quietly. Jack hadn’t heard, he assumed, because shortly after he’d been led to the bedroom and given a bundle of flannel, told to make himself comfortable.

He’d left the bundle of flannel at the foot of the bed, but now was as good a time to check what it was as anything. Probably a blanket, or, considering the nightcap…

It was a nightgown. One of the old fashioned, unisex ones, sized for someone a foot taller than Aster was, and twice as broad. Of course they’d all been made to be big like that. And of course someone stuck three centuries in the past would wear a nightgown to bed.

He was grinning. It felt weird, almost uncomfortable, but… Jack had given him a nightgown.

Aster pulled it on, and something deep inside seemed to relax. It was a very comfortable nightgown, in a soft brown colour. There was a bit of a drawstring at the neck, so it didn’t slip off his shoulders. He tightened it up just enough to be comfortable, and shoved the sleeves up so he could use his hands.

He almost wanted to look around and study the rest of the bedroom, but he was just so tired. His exhaustion had shifted with putting the nightgown on. Now, it wasn’t the fatigue from his emotions, but an honest weariness from the long day.

Aster crawled into the bed, the mattress cradling his body so he felt almost weightless. It must have been stuffed with wool, he thought, curling up a bit. The bed didn’t smell of sheep, though, so the wool must have been old… but still comfortable…

He must have slept, because his next awareness was of a dim, flickering light - a candle. He watched Jack secure the candle in the candle holder, which cast enough light for the winter spirit to do his puttering about, getting something out of the wardrobe Aster hadn’t had the energy to look at, shuffling things around on the dresser he’d mostly ignored.

Then Jack pulled off his sweater.

He was standing in the right spot for Aster to watch him, without seeming to be looking at him at all. The lighting was soft, flickering brighter and darker, so the shadows and highlights seemed to stroke Jack’s hair and slide over his body.
Jack wore a thin, white shirt under his sweater that looked old enough to be what he’d worn when turned into a spirit. In the lighting, the colour seemed to be that of white gold, just the faintest hint of yellow giving the clothing a depth and dimension mere white did not. The shirt was also a closer fit than the sweater, so it followed the lines of the human’s shoulders and torso, didn’t bag about and conceal.

Jack loosened the collar of his shirt, and then pulled it off in a single, smooth motion. Muscle flexed and skin shifted. His hair floated about his head like dandelion seeds from the static. Jack smoothed his hair out with a few absent swipes of his fingers, then folded up the shirt and left it on top of the wardrobe.

He paused at that point, as though to give Aster a chance to drink in the sight. Which he did, of course he did. He was an artist, and this image of Jack was pure, even intimate. This was something he could try for decades to get down on paper, and never succeed. The way Jack’s arms and shoulders were well muscled, not bulging the way most humans seemed to get, but with narrower lines. Built for speed, built for power to back up that speed.

The muscles in Jack’s back shifted, tensing and relaxing as he half-turned and gave Aster a look at the winter spirit’s front. Subtle, he thought, rubbing his cheek against the pillow. Jack’s musculature was subtle, but once you saw it, there was power there. A casual power that was at odds with his casually manic personality, but also worked in unison with it.

Jack sighed, and undid his belt. He skimmed his pants down off his hips, down his legs, and then stepped free of them. He stood, unselconscious and comfortable, gilded in firelight and concealed by gentle shadows, looking far more ethereal than any Fae had ever managed. He looked untouchable, some wild young god making play at being human.

Then he pulled a blue nightgown on, and with that he was Jack again, just Jack, spirit and powerful, yes, but human.

Still, Aster thought, rubbing his cheek against the pillow again. He was going to remember this moment for a good long while. And he felt touched, obscurely, that Jack had trusted him enough to change in front of him. Had trusted him enough to show him that moment, singular and beautiful.

He felt the mattress dip behind him, and after a second of shock, smiled at himself. There was only one bed, after all. And it might have been more common during the European Middle Ages, but it was still the done thing for several people to bunk down together during Jack’s time. Family, friends, and strangers… and this, too, was a form of trust. Sleeping next to another person…

Aster relaxed into the soft warmth, listening to Jack shuffle about and get comfortable, the quiet huff of him blowing out the candle. The darkness was comfortable; not something he’d found himself feeling, usually. Sleeping outside in the wild, the darkness was a shroud, hiding nighttime dangers. This, though… Four secure walls, a - a friend, yes - pressing up against his back…

Yes. This was a comfortable darkness.

Jack wrapped an arm around Aster’s waist, and nuzzled the back of the Pooka’s neck. He sighed, and went boneless in sleep.

Aster stayed awake, eyes wide and mind racing, for at least another hour, before he too slept, too tired to stay awake, even with the sudden surge of adrenaline.

Chapter End Notes
I feel like I should apologize for all the squishy feelings that are going to result from reading this story.

... I'm not going to, but I feel like I should.
In the morning, over a breakfast of apple-and-honey pie, he had to laugh at himself. Jack hadn't meant anything by nuzzling his neck; Jack had probably been acting in his sleep, or near enough asleep as made no difference. Besides, it meant a different thing for humans, that sleep nuzzling. He'd have remembered it too, except he'd been so tired and there'd been that moment, watching Jack change for bed. The strange feeling of intimacy had carried over, obviously.

Jack hadn't noticed anything in the morning, or so Aster figured. The winter spirit had woken up before the Pooka, so he'd walked out to the smell of sweet pie and Applewood smoke. He'd eaten two-thirds of the pie, and if Jack hadn't kept urging more food on him, and looked so smug, he'd have felt guilty for it.

"Who taught you to cook?" he asked, licking the last traces of sweet honey off his lips.

Jack picked up his empty plate, and carried it over to the cast-iron sink. "My mom. Ages ago. And then, well, after... I learnt from watching the various families, over the years. I guess I'm a little old fashioned, with a wood burning stove and all, but it works for me."

Aster nodded, and brought the last of the dishes over. Jack dunked them in the sink, and began scrubbing. Aster picked up a drying cloth, and set to that, ignoring the way Jack frowned at him. Probably some belief that guests shouldn't do any work. Didn't seem fair to Aster, especially not when the guest was as unexpected as he'd been.

"Well, my stomach appreciates your work," he said, grinning faintly. The rest had done him good, he supposed. He didn't quite dare think about - about the cause of his emotional breakdown - but otherwise he felt better this morning than he'd felt in decades. Probably longer.

He needed a distraction, though, something that would keep him feeling good about life, something that would keep his attention and not let him think about - things he didn't want to think about. Like... like shrines, and parents, and...

"Mind if I take a poke around?" he asked, gesturing towards the sitting room.

"Go ahead," Jack said. "The fence outside marks my boundary line." Jack paused, an odd set to his mouth. "Don't go out the gate, okay? The Native American spirits set up a place, basically North America before the white guys showed up. I've got their permission to trot around there... I'm sure it'd be okay for you, but I'm only a quarter-blood, I don't want to just presume."

"You're Native American?" Aster narrowed his eyes. He couldn't see it...

"Shawnee," Jack said. "And only a quarter. Grandma and Grandpa scandalized both their villages, but love won out in the end. Rest of me is British, German, and French by way of Canada."

Aster blinked. "Bit of a mutt, aren't you?"

"Nay-aw," Jack said. Aster blinked again. "Shawnee for 'thank you'. I don't speak as much of it as I'd like, but back when I could still learn from Grandpa, my dad was very subtly disapproving. I think he'd be very disappointed with me," he added. "I remember less French than I do the Shawnee, and I still swear in German."
Aster shook his head. "Well, if you don’t mind my poking around."

"Nah, just remember what I said about the gate. I have to duck out quickly, shouldn’t be more than four or five hours. Help yourself to any of the books, if you want to."

Aster nodded, and decided he’d start by poking around the bedroom. He’d seen plenty of the sitting room and the kitchen already, though he kept turning over new details that impressed him all over again.

He heard the front door as Jack left, but did his best to put it out of his mind. He’d been given permission to investigate Jack’s home. He wasn’t going to go around pulling open drawers or looking under furniture, but if it was out there in the open… Besides, poking around would help him get to know Jack.

Aster stepped into the bedroom and looked around. Well, the first thing was that, somehow, someway, at some point, Jack had made the bed. Aster hadn’t. He’d tossed the blankets more or less into place, but now you could probably bounce a quarter off the coverlet. The pillows had been fluffed and put on display. The nightgown Aster had left messily folded at the foot of the bed had been whisked away somewhere, probably the large wardrobe.

Theme going on in the furniture, Aster figured. Everything looked rough-cut, but smoothed out. Only the wardrobe looked different; still rough-cut in appearance, but also carved. The art style was clearly in the same family as the Native American artwork he’d seen over the years, though different enough he couldn’t figure out what the image was of. After a few minutes trying to figure it out, he decided he’d ask Jack later.

He opened the wardrobe, but found only a few items of clothing; the nightgown he’d worn last night, the one Jack had worn, a spare blue sweater and a second pair of trousers. There were several blankets and sheets, folded up with small wooden disks tucked in between. Aster chuckled; he was used to seeing lavender or rosemary sprigs tucked in among blankets and clothes for scent, but apparently Jack preferred cedar.

The dresser sat beneath what was likely the only mirror in Jack’s house, and Aster avoided looking directly into the polished silver circle. He didn’t need to see… anything. There wasn’t much in the dresser, just a few bits and bobs made out of flannel. Apparently even a winter spirit wanted to wear long underwear, or so Aster was forced to assume.

The two nightstands each had a drawer, but the drawers were locked. Aster crouched down next to one, and sniffed at the lock, as much out of curiosity as to say he’d done it. He didn’t smell much; a faint hint of something musky-sweet that -

Oh. Oh. He didn’t recoil, exactly, from the nightstand, but he did hurry to the foot of the bed, the bridge of his muzzle burning. Yes, that was, that was very private. Yes. And the thought of Jack - no, no, bad brain.

Really, Aster thought, staring blindly at a bit of needlework hung up on the wall. He was spluttering in his thoughts. Of course Jack would - the winter spirit had made it subtly clear over the years that he had a healthy libido, for a human. For spirits, who were usually a great deal more conservative and also less driven by biologically hardwired desires, that was…

None of his business!

What was he staring at, anyways?
The artwork managed to distract him from his embarrassment, and he studied the swooping lines and graceful curves, until what he’d thought was an abstract suddenly became clear. It was as stylized as any Native American artwork, looked like something that might get painted on a drum or something. At first he thought the bird was an eagle, but then shook his head. It wasn’t an eagle, it was a raven, done in dark red and blue. Underneath the raven was a canine, either wolf or coyote, and beside the canine was a rabbit.

Aster stared at that rabbit for what felt like eternity, and then looked over at the wardrobe. Now that he’d seen the cross stitch, he could recognize the carving. That was a rabbit. Or maybe a hare, it wasn’t exactly easy to tell the difference between the two species, not when the art was stylized like this.

Not when he’d spent the past… what, three centuries, avoiding images of rabbits and hares? Those medieval manuscripts, for instance, still gave him the shivers…

Just why had those monks drawn so many vicious, sword-bearing hares, anyways?

And why did Jack have this rabbit hung up on his wall, and carved into his wardrobe?

Quarter-blood, he’d called himself. Had a few words in Shawnee, apparently learnt from his grandfather…? That was probably it. Aster felt his neck muscles relax. He knew more about the Aboriginals in Australia and New Zealand, and at that he knew more about the Aboriginals than he did about most human cultures, but wasn’t there… totems? Tribe, family, and personal? Did that apply in Jack’s case?

He shook his head, and left the artwork, and questions, in the room.

There were more little bits of artwork in the sitting room, and not all of it was Native American. A fist-sized Buddha, carved out of a red-brown stone and polished, meditated on a window sill. There were window boxes, he saw, with flowering plants just the right height to show through into the room. There were three more pieces of needlework up on the walls, one showing a peacock, the second a paint horse, and the third showing a Japanese woman in a green and black kimono, white and gold koi fish swimming in a pond at her feet.

He had a feeling that Jack had done the needlework in the sitting room, but there were enough subtle differences between the stuff in here and the piece in the bedroom that there had to be two different hands involved.

Who had gifted Jack with that piece in his bedroom? It must have taken a lot of work, and -

No, Aster told himself, stop. Look at the books now, and leave the artwork alone. Jack would be back eventually, he could ask then.

There wasn’t much else to poke at. The few books were an interesting mix of older and current, Tolkien snuggled up next to some kind of murder mystery, a couple Star Trek novels bracketed by Shakespeare’s Scottish Play and a collection of the Bard’s love poems. Or sonnets.

What was the difference, Aster wondered, between a poem and a sonnet? Wasn’t a sonnet a kind of poem in the first place?

He understood art, could’ve held his own explaining the difference between surrealism, abstract, symbolism… and while he enjoyed listening to people read aloud, the details of creating prose were a - heh - closed book to him. At any rate, Jack’s collection didn’t appeal, and not just because the clear type was just small enough to be blurry.
If he were wearing his glasses, he could have read the Tolkien book, Hobbit. He'd heard about it, and everyone had been positive, would've been nice to know what'd been going on.

Aster shook his head, and took himself outside. And there, he had to stop and stare.

If Jack’s little home was impressive, his gardens were awe-inspiring.

Jack let himself into the spirit's domain, feeling the sudden pressure of magic against his skin, a pressure that was like the desert sun, though not quite so harsh. It was still a weight, though, and it took some effort to keep his own powers from stirring and flexing around him.

Normally, he felt just like he remembered feeling as a human, albeit healthier than he'd ever been. But every so often he could feel the magic deep inside expand outward, until it felt like his self stopped several inches past his skin. It happened rarely enough that he was always a little surprised by the feeling, though the lack of it meant - according to the people who'd explained it in the first place - his instinctive control over his powers was very good.

Not perfect, obviously, but very, very good. Good enough that they'd decided he didn't need teaching.

Jack shook his head, and started down the path that had appeared in front of him. Last time he'd been in this domain, it'd been all oversized - tree-sized - ferns, moss everywhere, and the kind of humidity that reminded him of the Pacific Northwest. Strange sounds had provided something of a soundtrack; grunts, the odd roar, things screeching overhead.

This time, the air was cool and dry, a little like the onset of winter in Mongolia. Grass, dry and yellow, reached up to Jack's shoulders, while miniscule drifts of snow sheltered in the lee of oversized boulders. It was quieter than the last time he'd been here, with a bit of far off rumbling, or maybe grunting, to disturb the quiet.

He could have flown, he supposed, but it was nice to meander. Gave him something to do while he thought.

Although what, exactly, he was trying to figure out…

It was about Bunny, of course. But was he trying to come up with ways to keep Bunny with him? Reasons why he wanted to? Trying to figure out how Bunny had gotten to this point?

He needed more information, and of the options available, he figured this spirit was better than anyone else, at least for the preliminaries.

Bunny had mentioned Pitch, Sandy, The Moon, and Mother Nature. He'd be hanged before he ever asked Pitch about Bunny, and he'd really rather listen to a couple hours of chalk squeaking on a chalkboard than talk to The Moon about anything. Sandy would be helpful, but it could be hard to stay on topic with him, Jack had already found. Of those spirits left, Mother Nature would probably be the best.

He just hoped she'd come up with a new name, other than Dubbie. It'd been fifty years, so surely…?

The landscape blurred, humping up in front of him and flattening behind him, until he stood just before the foothills of a mountain. Jack grinned. She must have gotten tired of waiting for him to walk all the way.

"Hey," he called, and looked around. This mountain range didn't look like any of the ones on earth,
though it was possible it was some range younger than he was used to seeing. "Lady, you here?"

"So respectful," Mother Nature said, striding out of a cluster of trees, ones that were a bit like evergreens, but not… exactly. "What brings you here, Frost?"

"Bunny." Jack moved to join her on a stone bench that she formed with a wave of her hand. "He's kinda a guest at my place for the moment."

Mother Nature raised an eyebrow. "Willing?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "I found him hypothermic in the mud, somewhere on the border of Ukraine and Russia. I couldn't just leave him there."

"Of course not." Mother Nature smoothed out her skirts, golden leather the Native American spirits Jack knew would've dismissed as overly plain. Suited her, though. "Bunnymund is an old friend of mine," she added, her expression distant.

"He's a new friend of mine. And I'm worried." Jack rolled his staff between his hands. "He's the Guardian of Hope, and the way he's acting, he doesn't have any."

"I have long suspected such," was the astonishing reply.

"What?"

Mother Nature frowned, until he ducked his head and mumbled an apology for raising his voice. "What do you know of him?" she asked.

"Until last night, I didn't even know he was an alien."

"Ah." Mother Nature arranged her skirts, and studied the landscape, which… changed. Jack clutched at the stone bench with one hand and his staff with the other, a little uneasy by the shifting colors and the way the land seemed to rise and fall like the ocean waves.

The grass thinned, colours darkening and smearing into the ground, which turned into a shade of ruby red Jack was certain wasn't seen in nature. Red earth was usually more red-brown, wasn't it? This was, well, not brown. It was sandy, too, that particular sharp-rough of black beaches. Tufts of what looked like ferns grew here and there, and just past a dip in the ground Jack saw what he thought was the top branches of some kind of tree. The rock bench was still there, though the stone had become a smoky gray-blue shade, and crumbled a bit under the pressure from Jack's fingers.

The air was hazy, that golden, too-much-dust-stirred-up shade. Jack breathed shallowly to start, but when he had no troubles he breathed normally.

"If this were real, the air would have a high hydrogen sulfide content," Mother Nature said. "To the point that a human would collapse within a minute, and be dead within two. Sulphur hexafluoride forms the bulk of the atmosphere, with oxygen a distant second."

Jack shivered. "But not here, right? Because it's not real." Admittedly, the first thing he thought of when he heard 'sulphur' was the one and only fire-and-brimstone sermon he'd heard Father Carter ever give, but everything that came after was a bit more scientific. Sulphur was… bad to breathe.

"Not here," she agreed. "But on the Pookan home world…"

Ah, this was a lesson, was it? Jack relaxed, and looked around again. He was reminded, mostly, of the Australian outback, or the scrubland around the Sahara. The air was dry. When he sniffed, he
smelt nothing, which really shouldn't have surprised him.


Right, yeah, no, he wouldn't want to smell that either. "How come Bunny doesn't have trouble with oxygen, if he's supposed to be breathing Sulphur and stuff?"

"Pooka are adaptable. Alone of the other races in the Golden Age, they could go anywhere, eat anything. Bunnymund could live on the ocean shore, if he so desired, and he wouldn't need gills to breathe, either. He simply prefers the land."

"Fortunately," Jack muttered. He wasn't too fond of any bodies of water deeper than a bathtub, if they weren't frozen over.

"The rest of our home worlds were much like Earth in configuration. The Pooka, however… They set up guest quarters, and a small, domed city for diplomacy, so that we could breathe. I remember visiting, once. It was so strange to my eyes. Everything smelt faintly of the sulphur, and while the plants inside the dome were familiar to me, the ones outside were very much not. Some seemed to be demi-animals, reaching out or recoiling from passing sentient. Bunnymund was my guide then," she added. Jack blinked. "I doubt he remembers."

"Why wouldn't he?"

She smoothed a hand over her hair. "I looked very different then. Among other things." Mother Nature stretched her legs out, and dug her bare toes into the earth. "If the forces brought against us had been properly living, the Pooka would have been safe, simply by the nature of their atmosphere. Personal breathing devices had not been a technological development any of us had been interested in. Those that we had were much like the early diving suits of Earth's history."

"But they, the forces, were immune?"

"Fearlings," she said, sounding tired. "No more than living shades, without the need to eat, sleep, or breathe. They could be fought, but the weapons most useful were expensive and rare. While the soldiers fought to hold the fearlings away from the home planets, more snuck around behind. It was a slaughter."

Jack shivered, and looked around. He could almost imagine it, great, shadowy shapes racing over the red dirt, tearing into anything and everything they found. "Bunny said he was the only Pooka on earth."

"He is the only Pooka to have survived at all."

Jack… didn't know what to think about that. The last? Not even the hope of - of other survivors traveling, finding their way to earth? That…

He could barely stand being the last Quaker of Burgess, the last Overland. How much worse could it be to be the last of a species?

It had to be terribly lonely…

"I don't believe Bunnymund will admit to himself that the others are gone," Mother Nature told him. The star-spangled expanse of her eyes seemed sad, though her face was expressionless.

"He survived," Jack protested, though not very strongly.
"He carried the First Light of the Universe, the seed that began all light on Earth. If anything can be said to be special circumstances, it is that."

He supposed…

"Losing everyone must be why he’s depressed," Jack thought aloud.

"Perhaps. Perhaps it is only the root cause, with any number of other issues giving the seed water and fertile soil in which to grow. Depression is a bitter fruit, and he has supped on little else," Mother Nature said.

Great, plant analogies… but not a bad one, this time. "He's not a human spirit, and he's not an animal spirit," Jack said. Mother Nature nodded. "He hasn't been overly welcomed by either side?"

"Not particularly. Being older than everyone -" What? Older than everyone? "- doesn't give him much authority, either. Not that he wants it, I shouldn't think," Mother Nature said, sounding troubled for the first time. "But to be outright dismissed, as he most usually is…"

Jack thumped his staff against the dirt. "What do you think I should do? Besides giving him a place to stay, I mean. Insisting on his staying. Uh."

Mother Nature smirked. "Are you going to let him leave?"

"Maybe for Easter," he replied, in as haughty a tone as he could manage. He pointed his nose skyward. "If I must."

He sobered, and spread his hands. "But, knowing him so long, what should I do?"

"You should let him leave," she replied. "The caged bird does not sing; the caged Pooka will pine away for freedom. Which does not mean you need to leave him unwatched," she added dryly. Probably thinking about Jack's little minions, such as they were.

"Point. Hadn't thought about that…" He nodded, and stood up. One of the twigs he'd tucked away in his pocket slipped out and fell onto his foot. "Oh, yeah. Reminds me."

"Oh?"

Jack pulled the twigs and root fragments out of his pocket, and held the pitiful collection out. "I think this might've been what set him off with the hypothermia and stuff," he said. "He was clutching a few twigs. I didn't think of it until this morning, but maybe?"

"I know he tends a few special plants, on the mortal plane. Pando - a quaking aspen colony, it's around eighty-thousand years old, at this point. A colony of Huon pines would be another one of his projects. And the Bristlecone pines, of course."

"Very old trees," Jack agreed. He tipped the twigs and roots into Mother Nature's hands, and sat down while she examined them.

"Norway Spruce," she said, and rubbed a twig between her fingers. "Very old. On the border of Russia and the Ukraine, you said?"

"I think so. Might've been a bit over to either direction, but definitely that area."

"In the Fulufjället National Park there is a Norway Spruce called Old Tjikko, just a little over ninety-five hundred years old." Mother Nature put the twig back down in her palm, and picked up a root
fragment. "This one was older."

Older. Jack was starting to get a bad feeling about this. "Bunny's been tending to really old trees? And most of them are known. Protected. This one wasn't, was it?"

"I haven't heard of any record-breaking old trees in the Ukraine. There is one I know of in Russia, but not a Norway Spruce. What are your thoughts?"

"That Bunny has a reason. Maybe it's a Pooka thing, maybe it's a Bunny thing. But if humans killed this tree... He's lost a lot of stuff. Would that be enough to tip him over?"

Mother Nature considered the fragments, and then nodded. "It might. There is a reason the saying is 'the straw that broke the camel's back'. One might bear load after heavy load, and manage to struggle on, but when you are already carrying so much weight, the littlest thing might send you to your knees."

"Is there anything you can do about it?" Jack asked.

Mother Nature looked up at him. "How do you mean?"

"I, well," he said, suddenly feeling like he was floundering. "I know humans have that rooting liquid stuff, for clippings. And it's probably been awhile since the tree was chopped down, but is there... anything?"

Mother Nature began to hum, and stir the fragments about on her palm. "Perhaps," she finally said. "Come back in a month's time. I will either have failed, or succeeded beyond my wildest expectations."

"That's... encouraging," Jack muttered, and shrugged. "Thanks."

Chapter End Notes

So, first thing you should all know, I've written almost a hundred pages in word (11 point, single space) and some 40 k words. I don't think there will be a problem in keeping ahead of what I'm posting. Second thing, since I'm so far ahead, I've decided I'll post twice a week. Who prefers Wednesday?
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aster heard the quiet creak of well-tended hinges, and smiled. Jack must be back. About time, it was getting uncomfortably close to noon. And he felt lazy and content, and very much unwilling to move.

He didn't know Jack was moving, or even near, until a shadow fell across his face, blocking out the light. He opened one eye, and almost chuckled. Jack seemed to be haloed with light, from how the sun was behind him. "Welcome back, mate."

"Bunny! Did you see the phantom woodchopper that must've been by?" Jack laughed, and crouched down next to him. "Thank you. That's, that's a lot of wood. Very impressive."

"You're welcome, mate," he said, his drawl emphasized by his lassitude. He felt… better. It'd been nice to just stretch out in the field after chopping up the wood, muscles aching from honest use.

Jack hummed. "How do you feel about bees?" he asked, for no reason Aster could figure.

"Bees?" Good little pollinators, he supposed. Long as they didn't try pollinating his ears. "Alright, at a distance."

"Ah." Jack reached over and brushed at Aster's shoulder. "Okay then."

Aster twitched his ears. "Why are you brushing at me?"

"Oh, no reason. Got a few leaves scattered on you."

No he didn't, he thought, as the quiet hum of the distant hives grew sharper, with a few closer notes. "Jack, are there bees crawling on me?"

Jack stopped brushing at him, and sat back. "Not anymore," he said, grinning.

There'd been bees on him? Aster fought against the urge to jump to his feet and shake himself off. And then he lost the fight, managing to leap to his feet from a lying position. He shook and swiped at his arms and chest, fur fluffed up and skin crawling underneath.

"Hey, hey," Jack protested, grinning, hands raised. "You're the one who decided to take a nap in their dinner. Speaking of, you hungry?"

"Are they gone?" He twisted to check his back, which - apart from a few blades of grass and a couple clover leaves - was bare.

He turned to the winter spirit… who was laughing at him! "Jack!"

"Big, brave Pooka-butt," Jack gasped, clutching his stomach. "Afraid of a few ibble little buggies! Oh wow!"

Jack was laughing at him. Aster swallowed, trying to force down a sudden lump in his throat. That was… only to be expected, right? It was… Jack, and he found humour in everything, even…

Jack calmed down, and grinned up at him. "It's adorable," he said, and twisted to his feet. "And oh,
so good for my ego to know you're not perfect."

... Wait, what?

"I'm not perfect," Aster protested. He followed Jack across the field to the cabin, which looked just as well made from the outside as the in.

"Sure you're not, Bunny," Jack said. He would have sounded agreeing, but something about his tone of voice just... sounded like he was humouring the Pooka. "What would you like for lunch?"

Aster glared at the back of Jack's head, and finally shrugged. "Not sure. Whatever you feel like making, I suppose."

"Time to get fancy, then," Jack said easily. "Keep me company?"

Aster settled down at the kitchen table, and watched in fascination while Jack worked. The Frostbite opened up what he'd initially thought was a low chest, but was actually the entrance to what had to be a cold cellar, something that was confirmed when Jack came back up with a small pat of butter, a crock of what turned out to be fresh buttermilk, and a jar of yogurt. Fresh, mixed berries were pulled out of a cupboard, along with half a loaf of bread. A small thing of honey was added to the table. Granola and two bowls were the last to be added.

"Unless you're hungrier? I mostly just spent the morning talking to people."

"I'm fine, Jack." It looked like plenty. He spooned a generous helping of yogurt into his bowl, and added berries - blue, red, purple, all the little round kinds - and granola. Jack cut him several slices of bread, and offered the butter.

They were quiet while they ate. Aster realized, to his chagrin, that he'd had two bowls to Jack's one, as he was going back for thirds.

"No, no, eat it." Jack drizzled honey onto a bread slice, folded it in half, and ate. He spoke, but it was so mangled by the food that Aster couldn't even begin to guess.

"What?"

Jack swallowed, the effort looking Herculean. "Sorry. I said it's good to see someone enjoying my efforts. Even if they are kinda minimal right now."

"How do you get all this?" he asked, gesturing at the butter and the yogurt. "I saw your hives, and that little scrap you call a veg garden, but...?"

"Trading, like I said." Jack sucked yogurt and honey off his spoon. "It's... you're going to laugh."

"Won't say I won't, but I'll try not to." What could be silly enough to make Jack reluctant to tell?

"Well, you know how they say storm clouds have a silver lining? And how kids usually see clouds and go 'sheep'? Well, I'm a shepherd..."

Aster squinted at Jack. "The clouds are made out of water vapour, Frostbite."

Jack waggled his hand back and forth. "Well, yeah, but... oh boy. Spirit world vs. Mortal. How much overlap?"

"Almost completely," Aster replied. He eyed his meal companion and host. "I'm one of the ones to first figure out the basics, where are you going with this?"
"Oh, good, I don’t need to explain. I’m not entirely clear on the details, anyways."

"So how would you have explained?"

Jack grinned, and stood up. "Back in a sec." He ducked out of the kitchen and picked something up; Aster couldn’t tell by the sound, but he thought it was off the mantle. Jack came back, holding a worn copy of Shakespeare’s love poems. He set the book down on the table.

"It’s a book."

"Sure. I wish I had a French translation or something, it’d help."

Aster shook his head. "This is nothing like how it works," he said.

"Isn’t it?" Jack held up the book. "It’s in English. Things are written a certain way, spelt a certain way, the words are pronounced a certain way."

Obviously. Aster folded his arms. "Get on with it."

"Same book, but in French. It’s the same subject. But it’s written a little different. Spelling is… well, another language. Even the word order will be changed a little, to keep the idea and the subject. And pronunciation, again, another language. But it’s the same book."

Aster opened his mouth, and then paused. As explanations went, it… wasn’t bad so far. And so far as Aster’s knowledge of how the spirit world and mortal world interacted, it made an acceptable analogy. Two things, almost exactly alike, only minor differences between them. And while plenty of people would disagree that a language was a minor difference, those people were probably all under a century in age. Live as long as Aster had, language was minor.

"Now this would work best if I could put the English book and the French book into the same space, so that they’re the same book." Jack frowned down at the book, and shrugged. "Imagine. So, I’ve got the book. English is the mortal, we’ll say, only because of the idea that French is the language of romance."

"You disagree?"

Jack opened the book to the halfway point, and held it out. "Read that. Shakespeare wrote it in English. Tell me that’s not romantic."

Aster glanced at the pages, but the small print was just this side of too blurry to read. "I agree."

"It’s not the pronunciation, it’s the feeling." Jack closed the book, and put it down on the table. "Anyways, back to my example. Spirit-book is French, because language of romance. Mortal book is English, because that’s what it was written in. If people believed Dutch was the language of romance, the spirit-book would be in Dutch."

"Which is why most spirits collect mortal objects. The books are in the right language and it’s easier to get a hold of."

Jack nodded. "Separating the spirit-book from the mortal-book’s a pain," he agreed. "Clouds, on the other hand… Bunny, what do people say about clouds?"

Aster blinked. And then blinked again. "You’re asking me?"

"Good point." Jack grinned, and leaned back in his chair. "Every cloud has a silver lining," he
proclaimed. "Clouds look like fluffy sheep. Or cotton, but more kids know what a picture-book, fluffy white sheep looks like than raw cotton."

Aster poked at the remains of his lunch. "You can get… spirit-cloud stuff?"

"Enough to trade for. Wool, mostly. Silver lining is only from the nastiest of storm clouds. Separating the spirit-stuff from the mortal-stuff is hard. Especially when my powers work best on the mortal-stuff."

"You’re kidding." Although… that seemed to be true for all of the Guardians, discounting Sandy. And Sandy dealt in dreams. But Tooth and North left things for the kids. Couldn’t leave a spirit-coin or a spirit-prezzie; if the human could see it, it’d vanish in a day. Come to think of it, Aster couldn’t think of any spirit able to deal with spirit-coins. So…

"Snow days," Jack said. "Manipulating spirit-clouds can get them moved into place, but won’t make it snow. Takes a lot of effort, too. Easier to work with the actual puffs of water vapour. I only muck about with the wool and silver when I want to trade something other than honey or whatever."

Aster nodded. Made sense, even those spirits that did work with materials that were entirely of the spirit world, did so with very limited amounts at any one time. "And for yourself? Get any cloud-wool or silver?"

Jack wrinkled his nose. "Yeah, no, not a chance. I get all the wool I need from the wild woollies shedding. I get a bunch of other stuff from the Native Spirits’ and their domain. It’s neat, they managed to import a whole bunch of mortal animals to their domain, so you can actually hunt and fish, or gather real plants. It’s not like Fairy Land, not one bit, and they’re cool with me bagging a deer or a couple pheasant every now and then, long as I’m respectful-like."

Aster nodded. "This isn’t what I expected for you," he admitted.

"What, having a domain of my own?"

He looked down, and studied the table. "Having a home."

Jack was silent for a minute, and then he stood up and began gathering the dishes and leftovers. "Want to dry again?"

"Sure.” He didn’t, quite, dare look at Jack’s expression. He wasn’t even sure why. Probably something to do with how Jack wasn’t acting anything like he’d expected; the winter spirit was being calmer, more mature, more self-assured, than he was used to seeing. It left him feeling off balance and nervous, worried about putting a foot out of line. He should have wanted to leave, but despite - or maybe because - of everything, he was comfortable. The cabin was safe, sheltering, a refuge from the greater world of mortals and spirits.

Jack washed the dishes and Aster dried, in silence. It didn’t take long; there wasn’t much to clean. Once Jack had put away the leftovers, and washed the table, there wasn’t anything left to do.

"Come on," Jack said, and led the way through the sitting room to the front door.

Aster followed, out the door and across the lawn to a bench. He looked around, his surprise at and appreciation for Jack’s garden no less for having seen it once before. Another person, less experienced with plants, might have thought that everything was growing wild, but he could see the subtle and careful hand of a master gardener at play. The garden was an artificial portion of the forest he could see beyond the fence, white birch and stately oaks creating a play of shadow and light for the green, green ivy and ferns, the timid crocuses and snowdrops and other early spring and late fall
plants. Bushes, heavy with many different berries, grew easily in the lee of a spreading willow. Someone very skilled had done the grafting on those bushes; blueberries and red currents grew together, nanking cherries and goji berries all grew on the same plant. Blackberries and raspberries, some yellow bunches he didn’t recognize straight off… obviously, this was where Jack had gotten his store of fresh fruit.

"I didn’t do this," Jack said, gesturing at the plants. "Friend of mine stepped in after they saw my blundering. My efforts were pretty pathetic. This… this is nice, though. I’m not allowed to touch any of it."

Aster huffed, lips curling up in amusement. "I did wonder. Can’t quite see you with your hands in dirt up to your wrists."

"Oh, I’m allowed to wreck my own vegetable garden. I do alright, I guess, even if things seem stuck colder than most plants like. Early spring, late autumn… frost every morning." Jack shrugged, and stretched his legs out. "I can usually grow enough to keep my larder from being completely empty."

"Why?" Aster cleared his throat when Jack didn’t immediately answer. "Most spirits just take from the humans. Or they have a bigger domain and other spirits to handle the farming."

Jack dug his toes into the dirt. The fingers of his left hand flexed once, as if he was feeling for the staff he wasn’t holding. "Most spirits are kind of… thieves, taking from innocent people. And I’m not a farmer, I’ve never been a farmer. I was a shepherd, and still kind of am. Besides, there’s the whole idea of… independence?"

"So you’ve never thought of, oh, bargaining for a place in some higher ranked spirit’s domain?" Aster hadn’t, but he didn’t want to be the court joke… or pet.

Jack looked amused, though. "That’d be difficult. Snow Queen lets me borrow her library, though." He paused, and frowned. "Well, more like she lets me tell her what books are good, obtains them, and in return I get to read whatever I want. And Comrade Russia will do just about anything for a small cask of Granny’s moonshine."

"You make moonshine?"

"And honey-wine," Jack agreed. His shoulders tensed a little, obviously taking Aster’s confusion for censure. "Hey, I’ve got apples and I’ve got honey and I’ve got time."

"Nothing against that, I just…” Aster gestured vaguely at Jack. "Still not fitting my… my impressions of you."

Jack smirked. "What, providing alcohol doesn’t fit the image of an irresponsible teenager?"

"… Well, when you phrase it that way…"

Jack tilted his head back and laughed. "I’m not a teenager," he said, when he’d calmed down. He was wheezing a bit, and grinning. "I’d just turned twenty before… So I’ve been twenty and two days for the past three centuries."

Aster looked away from those twinkling blue eyes. Was that poison ivy in Jack’s garden? Who’d put one of those plants in… actually, that fit with Jack, right along with providing alcohol to anyone who asked. Spirits for spirits. "Never acted like it," he grumbled. "Always laughing at everything, pulling pranks on me and everyone else…"

"Guardian of Joy. Or Fun." Jack poked Aster’s ankle with his toes. "I’d figure laughing a lot would
be required. And like they say, ‘growing old is mandatory, growing up is optional’. A lot of the time, the adults I saw? Looked like they’d had all the, the life and joy and fire of living sucked right out of them. Admittedly," Jack said, sounding a little sheepish, "I didn’t have my memories and it was the late seventeen-hundreds. Adults I saw were kinda busy working to make sure their kids had enough to eat. Not a lot of time for fun when you have to work eighteen-hour days."

"And glitter bombs are amusing only to the guy who doesn’t have to clean up after them," Aster said, ears flattening at the memory. Oh, he could’ve gone for Jack’s throat with his teeth after that one…

"Oh, come on! That time you got me with the pink and green bomb, you can’t tell me I didn’t look hilarious. You were grinning and everything, I saw you." Jack spread his arms, and waggled his eyebrows. "Admit it, I broke you out of a stupendously boring rut. I mean, out-tricking the trickster, didn’t that add a bit of spice to your Easter runs?"

Aster gapped at Jack, the sheer gall of his question robbing him of his voice. Spice? Spice? And - and boring rut? His Easter run a rut?

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" he demanded. "What kind of dill-brained lunacy would make you think that? I love my run when it goes exactly the way I want it to! With no glitter bombs! No wolf howls! No ice making me slip, no car horns, no owls going for my ears, and no blizzards!"

Jack recoiled from the violence of his declaration, grin slipping. "I, uh," he stammered.

Aster didn’t let him continue.

"What would make you think I like being delayed? Risking my holiday? My day, the day children believe in me, when for once I’m the one kids worry about missing? I have enough people telling me Easter’s nothing, my chocolates are nothing, I’m nothing - I don’t need one more!"

"You’re not nothing, Bunny," Jack said, but Aster had the bit between his teeth and was racing away with it.

"Yer not the first ta try wrecking my day," he growled, fingers flexing, claws extending and retracting. "Just the most persistent. Most folks back off after the first broken rib but you!"

"Bunny!" Jack jumped up onto the back of the bench, arms waving. "Slow down! That’s not -"

"You think it's funny!" Aster clenched his fists, then thought better of it and grabbed wood. "Always messing with my egg hunts! Wanna see me fail, just like everyone else. Toss glitter in my eyes and a blizzard on my day and I won't have it!"

"The blizzard wasn't about you!" Jack screamed, cheeks flushing. "Rest was me just trying to make you smile, god, just once!"

"It wasn't funny!" The bench cracked, and Jack almost fell to the ground. "Cruel and hurtful and - and - it wasn't funny!"

Aster turned and ran, like every last one of El-Ahrairah's enemies were at his heels. He ran, because if he stayed he'd attack Jack. Or burst into sobs. Or both.

He slammed into something. Knocked something else over. Fumbled blindly at a door, which wouldn't lock, and finally shoved the dresser in front to keep it closed.

Then he turned and crawled miserably under the bed covers.
It could have been minutes, hours, or days before his emotions settled enough for logical thought to resume. He wasn't really surprised to find himself curled up in the middle of Jack's bed, and the tears slicking down the fur on his cheeks was disappointing but not shocking.

He was surprised, a little, that Jack had left him alone for so long. He uncurled, back and legs protesting, and rolled onto his back.

He'd said… things. Things he hadn't exactly meant to. True, yes, but… almost too much so. The kind of truth that would let an observant person see, a little, of what made one E. Aster Bunnymund tick.

Well. No help for it. Jack was hardly the worst person who could've gotten that little glimpse into his inner thoughts. He'd have to go out, face the winter spirit, deal with the consequences. He didn't particularly want to, but he had to, so… might as well do it now.

Aster sat up, and blinked. The door was… behind the dresser.

Oh. Oh, *strewth*.

He'd gone and locked Jack out of his own bedroom, hadn't he?

Aster covered his face with his hands, and groaned.

Jack concentrated on each hair-thin sliver of wood he peeled off the block; for all his focus, he was chewing over a weightier issue than whether or not his little project looked like a donkey or a dog.

He didn't like bullies. No, that was a bit mild; he hated them, not passionately, but with a quietly burning anger that wasn't lessened by his knowledge that most bullies were children. Adult bullies were different. While children were brushed off as still learning, as not knowing any better, as playground crushes and still figuring out how to get along with each other, adults did know better. Bullying was harassment, assault, sexual assault, stalking and power plays.

It was the conscious and deliberate use of fear against the victim, taking pleasure in another person's misery and pain.

Jack didn't like bullies.

He'd never thought *he* was one.

Bunny hadn't liked his pranks on Easter. Jack hadn't exactly set out to cause trouble for Bunny, but… he'd laughed, hadn't he? Bunny'd yelled at him and he'd done the same thing next year, hadn't he?

He'd thought about that when he'd pattered around, checking on his bees and chickens. He'd thought about it while gathering fresh greens for the salad. He'd thought about it when he'd started dinner. He'd thought about it when he set the food to keep warm. He'd thought about it while he'd paced around the house, fighting against the urge to look in the bedroom window and see how Bunny was. He'd finally gone inside and started carving, and he was still thinking about it.

It wasn't just Bunny. It was… everyone he spent time with. Jokes, pranks, insinuations… People got angry. He couldn't say he *liked* it, not always, but sometimes… When his target had a big ego, when they weren't the nicest person around, yeah. He enjoyed taking those people down a peg or two. Sometimes it backfired.
But sometimes it wasn't about pricking huge egos and watching them flail. Sometimes it was about trying to cheer up someone sad, but…

Jack sighed, and stared into the flames. Clearly, he'd not only missed the boat with Bunny, he'd missed the river entirely. He hadn't amused Bunny. He'd made out like they were enemies. And the blizzard…

He cringed away from his memory, both of the blizzard and of Bunny's expression a few hours before. No, he hadn't… he hadn't done any good, those Easter pranks.

And if he'd made so many mistakes, big mistakes, with someone he only really saw once a year, what about the people he'd interacted with more often? What about the children? Kids had fragile egos, he'd seen that plenty. Throwing snowballs and the odd wild ride on a sled, it was all supposed to be fun. But…

His memory painted pictures for him; kids slipping on ice and falling, hard. Jack scattering papers with his wind, kids and teenagers crying out and chasing after them frantically. He'd always figured they were worrying over nonsense or something, but… he didn't know, did he? What about the timid kids he'd gotten involved in snowball fights? Were they having fun? Sure, sometimes it worked out - look at Cupcake. New kid, a bit scary, but she'd ended up with some fast friends. But other times…

The thing was, he hadn't paid attention. He'd been… It wasn't the first time the realization had kicked him in the brain, this was probably the fifth time in an hour, but he'd been very immature. Even childish. He'd figured that he'd been having fun, so obviously it'd been enjoyable for everyone else.

Maybe he hadn't set out to hurt people, but… he had.

And now he had to figure out what to do about it.

Starting with Bunny. He'd upset the Pooka. Something was blocking the bedroom door, and Jack had decided it was time to be smart and gotten the message the first time. Bunny wanted to be left alone, well… he'd leave him alone.

Nothing much to do now but sit, wait, and reflect on his many, many mistakes.

Jack glanced at the bedroom door, and cringed. He'd wait, he'd already decided. He'd wait until Bunny opened that door. He was a spirit; it was perfectly possible for him to sit and wait, unmoving, for years. His duties wouldn't even come to much harm; things tended to tick along just fine, as long as he wasn't beaten almost to death.

The block of wood was recognizably a four-footed animal when he heard something heavy be shoved around. It was in the bedroom. Probably the dresser or the wardrobe. Jack watched the door from the corner of his eye, instead of staring the way he wanted to.

Bunny opened the door, looking rather listless. Even his fur seemed depressed, flattened against his body. It made him look smaller, more vulnerable. Jack… didn't like it. He didn't like it at all.

"Jack," Bunny said, the word seeming to claw its way out of his throat, his voice rough and pained.

"Bunny." Jack turned the wood carving over in his fingers, then held it up. "I'm trying to make a donkey."

Bunny looked confused. "A donkey?"

"Mm. I think I'll call it Jackson."
It, obviously, took Bunny a minute. "Your name's Jackson?" He squinted at the little wood carving. "An ass, huh?"

"Seems fitting. I've been one for... most of my life. I never meant to, but it doesn't change facts."

Bunny's ears fell down, and his shoulders hunched forward. "Jack, I -"

"I'm sorry." Jack looked down at the carving, and went back to work. "For everything. You're right. I was interfering with your job. Threatening the belief kids have in you. Some of my pranks were annoying, some dangerous, all of them rude and disrespectful. I didn't intend... but I'm sure you've heard about intentions and paving a road to hell."

He heard Bunny breathe in, breath shaking. "Once or twice."

"All I can really say is that I'm sorry." Jack shrugged. "I mean, I hope you'll give me another chance, let me prove it, but there's really no way to justify what I was doing."

"You could," Bunny said. "You could start by telling me why."

Jack sighed. "I was dumb," he admitted. "I figured... if I was having fun, then it was obviously fun for everyone else, right? I mean... people laughed when I hit them with snowballs, and I laughed when I hit them with snowballs, so... I just, I wanted to get you to smile. Or laugh."

Bunny sighed, and moved over to the second chair. His face was damp with tears. "Pooka don't laugh," he said, and sat down. "Wrong vocal chords."

"Oh." Jack scowled at the carved donkey. He'd just sliced through a leg, that... that didn't work. He tossed it into the fire, followed by the splinter-covered rag. "I, well... still. I thought, I figured, it was fun, just... grumpy adult being a stick in the mud. If I'd taken five seconds to think, maybe I'd have picked up that it wasn't fun, but..."

"Good intentions paving a road to hell?" Bunny offered. He rubbed the chair arm. "I - it - you can't change the past, yeah? So let's just... move forward. Not, not make the same mistakes."

"You're a lot more forgiving than I am." Jack stood up. "Let me get dinner. We can eat out here tonight, yeah? Enjoy the fire."

Bunny nodded, and went back to rubbing the chair arm.

Jack got the bowls of stew, and bowls of salad, balancing them carefully while he walked. On the one hand, his balance was pretty good. On the other, he was normally carrying food just for himself. He wasn't used to having both arms laden down.

He made it to the seats without mishap, and offered Bunny his choice of bowls. He sat down, carrying only his own meal, and started picking at the salad. He put the stew bowl down in front of the fire, to stay warm. After a moment, Bunny put his bowl next to Jack's.

They ate in silence, at least for the salad. When they'd both moved onto the stew, Bunny cleared his throat.

"Yeah?"

"What's with the rabbit on your wardrobe, mate?"

Jack could've kissed the Pooka for finding a safe topic of conversation. "My grandda's family
"heritage, I guess you'd say?" he shook his head. "I guess technically I don't have claim to it - I wouldn't be able to get Native benefits from the government, at least, that stuff's tracked through the mother."

"Hard on those with a Native father."

"I don't think the government cares about being fair. Canadian or United States. I mean, it's getting better, if only because the really nasty people have died of old age. And I was born before the worst of the racism, at least in Pennsylvania. Anyways, the Native spirits told me Fox was his - tribe's not the right word anymore, but I'll be hanged if I remember what the right one is."

"Did the Shawnee have spirit animals?"

Jack shrugged. "I think pretty much everyone did, but yeah. And yeah, I know what mine is. Apparently I give him a headache." Jack really, really wanted to smirk… and didn't dare. His Grandfather had been a Crow, his mother had been a Coyote; sly and adaptable, both creatures, and both people. Jack, though… Grandda had put him through the ceremony when he'd been twelve. Rabbit was more of a homebody than Hare, in Jack's opinion. More social, both with the mortal animals and the spirits Jack had met.

He didn't figure telling Bunny that Rabbit liked dropping in to give Jack lectures would go over too well. He was getting an idea of what had been going on with Bunny; he seemed proud enough of being a Pooka, but Jack wasn't the only person to think he resembled a rabbit. Though, Jack should've been one of the first to see the differences. Rabbit, after all, was just as humanoid as Bunny, and the difference was like that between the moon and the sun.

Bunny wasn't an animal. Rabbit very much was, and proud of it. It'd probably be best to just keep the two of them apart.

Jack focused his attention on Bunny, who… probably wasn't named Bunny. Easter Bunny was a job description.

"Lot of tricksters in your family, then," Bunny mused aloud.

Jack swallowed a sudden lump of homesickness. "Everyone laughed," he said. "I remember that; Dad didn't really like it, probably because he couldn’t understand a word anyone said, but we visited once a month. Sometimes more often, if the weather was good. Half the time the Quakers seemed so serious, like if they cracked a smile their faces would break, but I remember, visiting the tribe, there was always someone howling in amusement. Even when things weren't easy, they found something to smile over."

Growing up, he'd been half convinced he'd shake off the Quakers and join the Shawnee. Only reason he hadn't… well, even three centuries past, he still didn't like thinking about it.

"I mostly avoided the Americas, for a while there." Bunny hunched over a bit. "They were some of the people who could see me, without believing…"

And they probably thought he was Rabbit, or Hare.

"I'm sure it wasn't as bucolic as my memories painted it," Jack said dryly. "The tribe moved when I was seventeen. Forest fire; didn't kill anyone, but there wasn't going to be any hunting or gathering for a few decades. They moved about two, three day's journey away. Three years, then my time as a spirit. At least I remember the good instead of the bad."

"I'm sure I remember something about wars between the groups."
"There you have it. Bucolic lifestyles are spoiled by war. It's all the yelling, you know."

Bunny's lip twitched, like he was thinking about smiling. "So who gave you the wall art?"

"One of the Native spirits. It's got my Grandda, Mom, and my spirit guides. If I really need advice, I can give the image a tap, it'll let them know I'm in over my head again."

Bunny raised his eyebrows. Jack shrugged. "Apparently my turning into a spirit means Mom and Grandda's guides feel a bit paternal about me. Personally, I think they just enjoy the nagging - and me understanding what they're saying."

Chapter End Notes

So it occurred to me in posting this that last chapter a few people had questions about the rabbits on Jack's wardrobe and in the needlework, and I said it's explained per Jack's heritage. Which is, uh, this chapter. Oops.
There was no way it could be that simple, but Aster decided to let Jack get away with the claim. He did note that Jack hadn't mentioned Rabbit. That was probably for the best. He'd never met the spirit, but… well. Right now, he didn't want to.

He just felt tired, really. The food tasted good, the chair was comfortable, but he couldn't bring himself to enjoy either part. Emotions were very wearing, after all. He didn't feel as bad as last night, as long as he didn't think about why he'd felt so poorly. But he didn't feel much better, either.

Jack asked him something. Aster turned his ears just in time to get that he'd been asked something, but not what.

"Sorry?"

Jack smiled, a wan little curve of his mouth. "I said, I was going to read. Did you want me to read aloud?"

Aster frowned in thought. "Depends on what you were going to read, I suppose."

"The Hobbit?"

Hadn't he thought about reading that for himself, earlier? Without his glasses, having Jack read aloud was the only other way he'd find out what was so special about the story. As another consideration, Jack had a nice enough voice to listen to, and if Jack was reading out loud, they wouldn't talk about things. His capacity for conversation seemed to have been filled, and he would really rather just sit and listen to nearly anything than exchange pleasantries.

"Sounds good, mate," he said, and started to push up out of his chair. Jack pushed him back, and took the empty bowl right out of his hands.

"Sit. Relax. I've got this." Jack smiled with half his mouth, and patted Aster on the shoulder. Then he headed into the kitchen. It didn't take him long to wash up and return, or Aster had fallen into a drowse. It felt like he'd done no more than close his eyes, and when he opened them Jack was pulling the book off the mantle.

Jack looked around, frowned, and handed the book to Aster. "Sorry, just a second," he said, and vanished into the bedroom. He came back out with the little oil lamp he'd noticed on the night stand. Apparently the cache of oil was kept in the kitchen, because that's where Jack took it. When he returned, the oil lamp was lit and burning with a steady flame, safely tucked away behind the shielding glass.

"Better for my eyes," Jack said, and nodded at the lamp. He set it on the table between their seats, and accepted the book. With a bit of adjusting, the chair was where he wanted it. Then he opened the book up and began to read.

Aster closed his eyes and listened. The strangely conversational prose, that he knew would have annoyed him to no end if he'd been reading it, seemed only natural in Jack's voice. The casual asides were as inoffensive as a friend noticing his confusion and giving him a quick briefing. The description of the Hobbits was bittersweet; nothing like the Pooka physically, of course, and they'd
lived differently due to an atmosphere and soil composition different from Earth's. But the mannerly nature, the valuing of comfort and suitability over shiny metals and sparkly rocks… That was very Pookan.

Although, the homebody nature of the Hobbits was as unlike what the Pooka had been as the love of earned comfort was like. But then, the Pooka had not evolved in a protected little Shire; they had evolved fighting tooth and nail against the predatory flora and fauna of their home. A comfortable Burrow was all well and good, but you had to go out and earn it. There had been Pooka that didn't serve the mandatory term in the Brotherhood, but they'd been let off because of injury, or service that couldn't be set aside for the four years required.

He chuckled a little when the Wizard was introduced. He winced when the first dwarf arrived at Bag End, but the wince was as amused as it was pained.

Jack stopped reading. "What?" he asked.

"Ever meet a dwarf?" Aster bit down on his bottom lip, corners of his mouth curling up anyways. "That's… that's a good description, just a bit… off."

He heard cloth rustle as Jack shifted. "I've never met a dwarf, so far as I know," he said. "How'd Tolkien get it wrong?"

Tolkien must have been the author. "Dwarves don't grow beards very well. The hair on top of their heads, though… crikey. And the more braids a dwarf has, the higher ranked he is; their leaders will do nothing but spend all morning getting braids put in, each braid barely thick enough to secure beads on. The more serious a matter is, the fewer ornaments and adornments they'll have, but otherwise…” He cracked one eye open. "Isn't there a word humans use for tasteless and gaudy humans flaunting their wealth?"

"Bling?" Jack suggested, looking amused.

"Yeah, bling sounds right. Only on the dwarves it is tasteful. Anyways, dwarves go for rocks. Can't build anything with gemstones, though metallic ores are no bad thing for them."

"Wait until we get to the elves in a day or two," Jack said, grinning. He went back to his reading, and Aster relaxed as the story began again.

His last clear memory was of Bilbo Baggins racing out the door in pursuit of adventure… and then he had, well, not memories exactly, but it was too lucid to be a proper dream. He was Bilbo Baggins, or something very much like, though still a Pooka. And he was chasing after someone, who kept just ahead of him - and there was a horse. It didn't much like him.

And then Jack was shaking his shoulder, calling for him. Aster woke up, and blinked in confusion. Where'd the horse go?

"You fell asleep, Cottontail," Jack said. Aster wrinkled his nose at the nickname, but didn't protest. What was the point? "C'mon, I think it's time to go to bed, don't you?"

Aster scrubbed his hands over his face and yawned. "Suppose," he mumbled. He glanced at the door, ears falling back. He didn't want to leave, but Jack had already given him space in his bed once already; twice might be pushing it.

"I'll get you a nightgown," Jack said. "Do you want a brush, or…?"

"I, ah," Aster stammered. Jack wasn't offering him another night, he was just assuming that it was a
given. It should've rankled, especially after... after he'd locked Jack out of his own bedroom. But it
didn't.

He must have been more tired than he'd thought.

"No, ah, that's fine. Everything feels fine. I don't need a brush."

"I should at least show you where the mouth rinse is. Tooth would cry over your teeth if I didn't."
Jack straightened up, and offered his hand.

Aster accepted the help, feeling rather bemused. And then confused, when Jack led him into the
kitchen. A door he'd completely missed, probably because it was tucked away beside the pantry, let
into a small room. If he'd seen it from the outside, he probably would have assumed it to be some
kind of shed or something; the windows, such as they were, were up near the ceiling, narrow slits
more for air flow than anything.

There was a small sink, just big enough for washing hands - or teeth, he supposed. The back half of
the room was sectioned off - "Steam room," Jack said. "Good for aches and pains." - and opposite
the sink was a construction that looked like a barrel... but one big enough to fit North in, with room
to spare.

"The bath," Jack said, and patted the rim absently. "Good for soaking clothes in, too. You might
want to think about it, tomorrow."

Aster scowled. "What's that mean?"

"While I got most of the mud off, you still look kinda dingy?" Jack shrugged. "I was going to offer
this afternoon, but, uh... shoved my foot in my mouth up to the knee. Or maybe the sauna?"

Aster looked from the oversized water barrel to the sauna and back again, and then shook his head.
"I'll think about it," he temporized. He'd barely noticed he wasn't covered in mud, hadn't he? Hardly
the best showing, being so oblivious to the little matter of personal cleanliness. Now that his attention
was drawn to it, though, he felt... itchy.

A bath would... not be unwelcome.

Jack offered him the mouth rinse. Aster swished a mouthful around and spat it into the sink. Jack was
a little more thorough, but then again, Tooth did stick her fingers in his mouth all the time. She'd left
Aster alone ever since he'd bit her on reflex.

"Spearmint?" he asked, and ran his tongue around the front of his buck teeth.

"And rose petals, believe it or not. I had to give Tooth a jug of it for testing before she stopped
freaking out. Apparently the idea that I not only didn't brush my teeth, but used homemade
mouthwash, nearly made her faint."

Aster nodded, and followed Jack to the bedroom. Jack gave him the same nightgown from last night,
and Aster pulled off his kit with a sigh of relief. The warm flannel was soft and snuggly, and he
burrowed into the bed without any further encouragement.

Watching Jack changed for bed should have been awkward, considering. Jack knew he was awake,
they'd had a spat, but no. Jack pulled off his clothes and pulled on his nightgown, just as casual as
the night before. It was, perhaps, less ethereal; better lighting from the oil lamp prevented the play of
highlights and shadow.
It was still touching, though, that Jack trusted him with that much vulnerability.

Aster hummed when Jack climbed into the bed behind him. Jack didn't immediately move to press against Aster's back. Instead, he reached across and turned the oil lamp down until the flame guttered out.


He yawned, and curled up on his side. "I'll tell you one day," he mumbled, or possibly dreamed. He felt Jack wrap an arm over his waist, and a slightly chill nose press against his neck, and slept.

He woke up to a crowing rooster and a patch of sunlight shining almost directly on his face. Aster groaned and rolled away from the light, pressing his face into a new pillow. It smelt like Jack. Tasted like cotton, after a large yawn resulted in a mouthful of fabric. He sat up, and scratched at the base of his neck. He was alone in the bed, and he could smell flapjacks and bacon.

Aster left the nightgown folded at the foot of the bed, and padded out to the kitchen.

A plate of flapjacks and bacon had been left to keep warm in the oven; the flapjacks still light and fluffy despite being lightly baked, the bacon crunchy and juicy. A fist-sized pitcher of maple syrup sat on the table, beside a pat of butter. A place had been set with a knife and fork, while the other spot had a bowl full of apples and pears.

A piece of heavy parchment, folded in half, had been left beside the fork on the table.

Aster picked up the parchment, and looked around. Presumably the paper was for him; sooner he looked at it, sooner he could check where Jack had gone.

Bunny, scrawled across the paper, called out suddenly. Had enough time to make breakfast but little else. If you want bath, you need to heat with kettle. Water will stay warm while tub is filled. If you want sauna heat rocks in oven. Rocks will cool, no magic keep warm there. Didn't have time to set out the jars in garden, can you make sure my veg. don't die?

Thanks, Jack.

The writing was legible enough, Aster supposed. Not professional quality, especially not with typewriters and laser printers. Surprising, the same way the house was surprising. He shook his head and moved the plate of flapjacks and bacon to his spot. The plate was warm, but not overly hot. He squinted at the plate and then at the oven, but he couldn't see any signs that either had been spelled to prevent burnt hands. Jack must have just left, then.

He poured syrup over the flapjacks, and began to eat. Ten flapjacks and as many pieces of bacon was a good amount of food, but he found himself mopping the last of the syrup up with the final bite of flapjacks, the bacon nothing more than a tasty memory and spot of crumbs on his lips.

He washed the plate and cutlery, and studied the cupboards. One had no front, and was for glasses and mugs. The other two did have fronts, and the first one he checked was full of spices and jars of flour and sugar. The other had the plates and bowls, though he had no idea where the fork and knife were supposed to go. In the end, he left them on the counter, and resolved to pay more attention to where Jack got things and put them.

He checked the letter again, but it hadn't changed any. Jack was out, and he was offering the bath or sauna.
Aster looked out the window towards the gardens, and beyond that the fence. He could leave, he supposed, but despite how awkward yesterday had been he felt... comfortable. Besides, he thought, moving to the bathroom. It would be rude to just leave while Jack was away, rather like sneaking off after taking all the good silver.

On top of that, he itched. And a good, long broil in a sauna sounded like just the thing.

Aster found the rocks for the sauna in the middle of the space, just above a drain set into the floor. The box did have magic on it; he had to take it all the way outside to get a good look in the sunlight before he could see the sigils carved on the handles. Heat-resistant handles, on a metal box. He could bake the rocks in the oven, get them good and hot, and hold the handles with his bare hands without trouble. He shook his head in admiration, and went back inside to get the sauna ready.

The rocks were baking, the small butte of water was full and waiting. There wasn't much to do until the rocks were hot enough they glowed.

Aster headed outside, to check the vegetable garden Jack had mentioned but he hadn't seen.

It was at the side of the cabin, far enough from the beehives that, with the clover field right there, they probably wouldn't bother him. The garden had been laid out well enough, and the plants were clearly well established. The jugs that Jack had mentioned were terra cotta pottery jugs, each big enough to hold four or five gallons of water. Each jug was riddled with thin cracks, which would let the water leak slowly over the course of the day, watering the plants without drowning them.

It was a good set up. Jack clearly understood the theory of gardening, at least.

He was just absolute pants at execution.

The dirt was bone dry, but the plants looked like they'd, one and all, been overwatered. The poor things didn't seem to know what season it was, either; he could see the buds of tomatoes on one vine, leaves turning crisp brown on another. The potatoes were flowering, but it was very hard to kill potatoes. Even though these seemed to be rotting, just the start of it, in the earth. Green beans and snow peas trembled next to each other, trying to flower and form pods at the same time. The herbs were in slightly better shape, but only just.

Aster could only shake his head in bemusement. And then he set to work.

The first thing he did was fill the jugs with water from the kitchen pump. They began to leak immediately, but it was a slow, drop by drop trickle. He did adjust the pots for a better dispersal of water, setting them closer to those plants that got thirstier than the rest.

Then he drew on his power, working with each plant, reminding them of the proper season. It was hard work. The magic flowing through him was at once pleasurable and just this side of pain, like a good workout, stretching muscles to their limit. It took time and energy; it was easier to remind plants of the season when it was spring, though he didn't need to do that much these days. It was currently summer, and while some of the plants should have been ready for the first harvest, the others weren't due for some months yet.

The flowers on some of the plants withered and fell off. On others, they brightened and grew bigger, while the budding vegetables withered.

Jack didn't have a big vegetable garden, fortunately. Aster was out of practice. When he was done, the muscles in his back were trembling, not quite to the point of twitching and twisting painfully. He'd need that sauna now.
It'd been about two hours, he saw, when he checked the sun's position. The rocks should be good and hot by now.

They were. Aster protected his hands with several already charred rags. While the handles were merely warm, the inside of the oven was hot enough to make him avert his face, the heat like a blow. The rocks glowed like red embers about to finally die. He carried the box into the sauna, returned the rags to the kitchen, and then tucked himself up in the sauna.

The bench wasn't long enough for him to lie down, but he didn't feel put out by it. Only a contortionist - a short contortionist - or a two foot tall brownie could have laid down. The seating was comfortably carved and contoured for him to sit back at something of an incline. One seat was properly sized for someone Jack's height, while the other was clearly for someone taller.

Aster poured the first dipper of water on the rocks, and sighed at the hiss and snap of water turning instantly into steam.

The sauna quickly turned muggy-hot. Aster groaned as the muscles in his back and shoulders relaxed. His fur began to slick down from the humidity, but not with that disgusting, floating feeling that came from being submerged in water. Some Pooka had enjoyed it, but Aster had never been able to adjust to the sensation.

He relaxed, almost mindless, for what was probably an hour. By that point the rocks had cooled; steam still billowed off them when he poured dippers of water over them, but they had ceased glowing.

Of course, now that he was relaxed and starting to feel clean and rested, his mind refused to settle. Everything that had happened; how could he not dwell on it? It - was it only the third day? If that, considering he'd been brought here in the evening. Aster shivered, despite the heat, and hunched over. He'd spent more time indoors, in civilized surroundings, ever since… ever since his parents' shrine had been destroyed.

Tank tracks; some kind of conflict in the area, he supposed, though it could have just as easily been maneuvers. Or industrial. He'd heard of small tanks being used to clear a path for road builders to follow. No one knew about the shrine, he'd gone to some effort to keep it from the humans' knowledge, but that seemed to have bitten him in the arse now. His other little projects were all in protected territory.

Aster sighed, and dragged his hands down his neck and over his shoulders, squeezing the water out of his pelt. He curled his lip at the colour of it dripping off him. He considered shaking, but that would inevitably get filth all over the inside of the sauna. Hardly good guest behavior.

The loss of his parents' shrine hurt, but… he'd lost shrines before. Humans hadn't always been determined to preserve interesting bits of flora and fauna. Trees had been cut down, entire forests turned into firewood and charcoal. He'd grieved, accepted it, and started a new shrine.

He'd just never had to do that for his parents.

Most - pretty much all - of his shrines were… generic. For his fellow warriors, the civilians, the various species of Celestials that had been slaughtered. He'd been more specific for close family, though. There was a crystal cave for his favourite cousin, an oasis for his older brother. His parents had been married under a tree with a resemblance to the Norway Spruce, so it had only felt natural to make sure there was always a tree growing beside the small cairn of interesting rocks.

And now it was gone.
He knew better - now that he could be logical, instead of merely emotional - but it felt like he'd failed. Hardly new, he thought, bitterness wedged tight in his chest. All the way back to his childhood, there'd always been something. Being born sayach, which - his parents had loved him, but he knew they'd wanted grandkits. His brother was hardly going to get them any, having sworn into the Priors the same day he'd attained his majority. His sister had died before he'd been born, a member of the Brotherhood, fighting slavers. He'd been their last hope, but not only had he been sayach, with all the fertility issues that went hand in hand with it, but he'd decided to make a career in the Pookan Brotherhood.

Oh no, not content with just one tour of duty, he'd re-enlisted, tour after tour, moving up in the ranks as he went. His parents had been proud of his work, but medals hardly made up for the terror they must have felt. They'd lost one kit to the Brotherhood's duties; they must have fretted every time they saw a uniform, sure that it was a bearer of bad news.

And, of course, there had been Pitch.

Aster had trusted Pitchner, considered him a peer if not a friend. They'd been similar enough in rank as their respective militaries figured things, there'd been an ease to swapping stories over a drink with each other than with their subordinates. And when the Tsar asked for a guard, and Pitchner volunteered, well… who better?

Who worse? Aster could have spoken up, after all. He knew about the man's daughter, his wife. The posting didn't have an end date. Better to have sent the Dainra; their cold logic and hive mind would have prevented… what came next.

Pitch had been right there. Aster had been staring him in the face. And instead of killing him then, preventing the calamity, he'd… hesitated. And Pitch had killed the Tsarinna. Slaughtered the guards. Unleashed the fearlings, taken out the palace communications, and - and Aster had clawed his way out with the survivors, knowing that everything that Pitch did after that was as much on his shoulders as that monster's.

Because he could have stopped Pitch. But he hadn't.

… Well wasn't this thoroughly depressing? Aster sat up straighter, and clenched his teeth. What happened to his parent's shrine was not - it was upsetting, yes, but it wasn't the end of the world. He'd make a new one, explain things to their spirits, and move on. Dwelling on the past wasn't going to do any of that, and he had other things to think about, besides.

Like Jack. This was the third day he'd spent in the winter spirit's home, and… Oh strewth, he hadn't done anything but cut a bit of firewood and fix the garden. He'd eaten Jack's food, warmed himself by Jack's fire, slept in Jack's bed. And he'd done practically nothing to pay Jack back for any of it!

Aster stood up, and opened the door. He'd sluice the last of the dirt off, and then he'd have to come up with something he could do. Something Jack couldn't do for himself. Although what, precisely, he could do for this surprisingly competent Jack Frost, he couldn't say.

Chapter End Notes

So Bunny's opinion of reading the Hobbit vs having someone read it to you - or the movie - is also, sadly, mine. (I know, I'm scum). It just distracts from the immersion, that style, unfortunately. Oh well.
Yes, I will explain *Sayach* just not right now. Patience.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack leaned on a tree. The dryad plucked at his sleeve fretfully, twig-like fingers catching in the fabric. "It's not much farther," she whispered, her voice the creaking of branches and the rustle of leaves. "Just over the next hill. There, go to my sister, she will help you."

"Thanks," Jack croaked, and shoved away from the graceful birch tree. He stumbled to the oak, which was still slender with youth. The oak dryad was even smaller than usual, svelte instead of statuesque. She regarded him solemnly from the branches of her tree, dark green eyes over-big in her face. Unlike the birch, she didn't offer him encouragement.

Jack felt the wind rustle his hair, but the elemental was as exhausted as he was, and could muster little more than a mild zephyr. Which was why he was walking.

Jack nodded to the dryad, and moved to the next tree. This one didn't have a dryad. He wished it did. Dryads were nice. They looked a little weird, bark for skin and leaves for hair, but they were really very nice. Long as you didn't have an ax with you.

An acorn nailed him in the ear. Jack shot upright, vision whiting out from the pain. He slumped back against the tree, gasping. Another acorn got him in the knee.

Dryads were nice, except that one. Not letting him sleep. Which… the dirt wasn't comfortable. So probably good, not to sleep. But ow.

He pushed back up onto his feet, and accepted his staff. The wind curled around him, and urged him on. Up the hill, because he was dumb. Building on top of a hill. Why had he done that?

Because he was stupid, obviously. Jack groaned, and hobbled step by step up the hill. Ow. Very ow. He was done with today, could he just be done? Where was his bed?

Up. The fucking. Hill.

His skin began to tingle, and he groped for the key. It was like touching lightning, but he caught hold and turned, and tumbled through.

His face bounced off the ground. Cheekbone. Shattered one. Oh, the whimpering was him, okay then. Long as he knew. He felt the wind press against his back and then drift away. Wasn't much the wind could do here; even if the elemental took a physical shape, it would lack a few things. Like hands. General understanding of ouchies and how to fix them.

"Jack? Jack!"

A voice. The wind didn't have one.

"Jack, what's this bloody dog - Jack!"

Hands touched his shoulder, rolled him so he was on his back. He blinked, because that didn't make sense. He was very ow. The wind didn't have hands. Oh, those were very green. Nice eyes. Very pretty. He tried to tell the eyes how pretty they were, but they seemed to be ignoring him. Or maybe the concussion was… was. It was. Yes.
The world got very swoopy and blurry, like riding the wind only without any of the control. He might have passed out. Jack wasn't sure, but there was a chunk missing from his memory. The gap hadn't been excised with surgical neatness; rather, the edges were ragged, the stray wisp of red and black pain suggesting that, perhaps this once, not remembering was the best thing for him.

He was in bed. It took a ridiculously long time to process that simple fact, but there it was. He was in bed, stripped to his skivvies… no wait, he was completely nude. That was just a bandage wrapped around him, low on his hips. There were other bandages, big and small, all up and down his body. He'd been draped with a sheet, but no blanket.

Jack blinked, mind moving sluggishly. His confusion only grew when Bunny pushed the bedroom door open and brightened at the sight of him.

"You're awake! How do you feel, Jackie?"

Jackie? Since when had he been Jackie? "Thirsty," he croaked, suddenly conscious of the sour taste in his dry mouth. He started to look around for his staff, but Bunny held a glass of water up in front of him and he forgot everything else.

Bunny had to hold the glass to his lips, and kept muttering what sounded like dire threats when Jack tried to drink too quickly. He knew it was too quickly, too. If he gulped, the way he wanted to, he'd just throw it all up. But it was so hard to slow down, to let the water trickle into his mouth and down his throat.

If he drank too slowly, the glass was empty too quickly. Jack didn't, quite, whine when Bunny took the empty glass away. The Pooka smiled at him, and smoothed his hair back with one large hand.

"You've slept a while, Jack. Almost two days. I've got some tucker cooking, but if you can give it a bit more, that'd be best."

"I'm fine." His stomach lurched, and not in anticipation. "Did you… bandage me?"

"Made a right mess of your place, looking for the bandages. Found them, eventually." Bunny smiled, or at least, the corners of his mouth turned up. His eyebrows were furrowed together, eyes soft and worried. "Got into a blue, did you?"

Jack was distracted from his unexpected embarrassment. "A what?"

"Fight," Bunny clarified.

"Oh." He pulled the sheet a little higher up his chest. His broken finger had been splinted. "Sort of? I wish people wouldn't name hurricanes," he added.

Bunny paused, halfway between sitting and standing. "What's a hurricane's name got to do with anything?"

Jack shrugged, and immediately regretted it. "Well," he said, once the pain had eased enough for speech. "It turns a bunch of wind and cloud into an entity. Not smart, not smart at all, but able to… argue."

Bunny hissed in sympathy, and patted the one square inch of Jack's body that didn't hurt. "How 'bout I check on that tucker?" he asked.

"Sounds good." He'd have to eat sometime. Better to get it over with.
Bunny wasn't gone very long, Jack didn't think, but it was hard to keep everything straight. He was no stranger to pain; his mother had said he'd gotten his first major injury when he'd been two, when he'd annoyed one of his father's sheep and gotten butted in the head. He'd lost three baby teeth, and blacked both eyes. It hadn't taught him anything, if the broken bones, wrenches, fist fights, and everything else that had followed meant anything.

The Pooka returned with a steaming bowl of something. Soup, Jack saw, when Bunny put the bowl down on the night stand. Bunny helped him sit up, and Jack hastily arranged the sheet to properly cover his lap. Not just for modesty; the soup was bound to be hot.

He flushed, though, thinking about it. He was naked under the sheet. Bunny had bandaged his wounds, including the one just above his groin and the other on his thigh. So, did the Pooka think he was a pathetic fighter? Or did the damage just amuse him, pitiful little frost spirit thinking he could tangle with a hurricane…

"Here, mate. And I did fix up your veg out to the side, there. Spoils of my efforts, enjoy."

Peas, chunks of carrots, potatoes, and other vegetables he didn't recognize it'd been so long, vied for supremacy of the soup's surface. The steam smelt of the thick broth, and his stomach growled. Jack flushed again, and hastily scooped up a spoonful and brought it to his mouth.

It tasted amazing.

His nausea vanished like mist in the morning, and only the way his hand trembled kept him from gobbling the soup down as fast as humanly possible. He did consider simply burying his face in the bowl, but that would have spilled some of the soup.

There wasn't a speck of meat, not even chicken, in the soup. It was almost like his mother's, that way, except her broth had been thicker, more like a gravy. He'd never been able to recreate the taste, more's the pity.

Bunny sat on one of the sitting room chairs, relocated to Jack's bedside, and watched. Jack did his best to ignore Bunny, with indifferent success.

Jack finished the soup, and sucked the last of the flavour off the spoon. "Thanks," he said. He went to put the spoon back in the bowl, but it slipped out of his fingers. He began to tilt sideways.

Bunny caught him. Jack blinked, startled at how warm Bunny's hands were. The Pooka lowered him to the bed, and pulled the sheet up.

Jack blinked, and must have fallen asleep, because when he opened his eyes it was night. The oil lamp was lit, and there was a warm weight draped over his feet. He glanced down, unsurprised to see the wind in its preferred mortal form. The Australian cattle dog wasn't what most people thought of, but the wind didn't seem bound to what the mortals believed, not that way. The perks of being an elemental, he supposed. The wind looked as tired as Jack felt, and didn't have the option of eating to regain strength the way he did.

Poor thing.

Bunny was curled up in the chair, looking wary even in his sleep. He didn't like dogs, Jack knew. He should have warned Bunny about the wind, but half the time it didn't take a physical form.

While he considered the best way to explain things, he fell asleep again.

It unfortunately set the tone for the next day. Possibly longer, he wasn't sure.
Jack woke up, stayed conscious just long enough to eat what he was given, and then fell asleep again. He knew - or when he was awake, he knew - that it was a side effect of how quickly he healed. Most spirits healed twice, even three times as fast as a mortal. Jack tended to heal about four times as fast as the spirits, probably from all the practice. It meant he needed more food and rest.

Bunny was always there when he woke up. Jack was confused, he admitted to himself; as much because he couldn't quite remember why Bunny was there as, well, because Bunny was there. Bunny barely tolerated him most days, right?

Except… he remembered something, in the blurry, missing patch, that Bunny was staying with him? What was that about? And why?

Jack woke up, feeling… better. He sat up, unaided, and looked around. The wind was gone; the wind always recovered faster than he did, and even if it stayed in his domain, rarely stayed inside. Usually, the wind roamed the world, content to rush to Jack's side once he was ready to travel. Bunny wasn't there either, though judging by the good smells wafting through the cabin, he was making something tasty in the kitchen.

Well, he'd better do a quick once over before he ran out of privacy.

His injuries had been tended, probably Bunny’s work. The worst had been reduced to scabbed over lines and scrapes, the smaller injuries faded to bruises or completely healed. His broken finger was no longer broken, just stiff. Only the bandage around his hips remained; he didn't really want to see the wound underneath. It still hurt, and it'd been pretty bad. He had a small bit of memory - going headfirst into the trees, the wind too far away to catch him, broken branch broken branch sharp and pointy tree stump - but nothing really specific. It'd probably come back to him later, when he had enough energy to dream again. That was what usually happened.

He looked at the door, cracked open half an inch, and then turned to the night stand. It was child's play to unlock the drawer; the key was kept in a little pouch, secured to the underside of the drawer. He opened it just enough to pull out the folded piece of parchment, and quickly scanned the letter he'd written himself several days earlier.

Self, if memories not back three days after recovery see Baby Tooth. Head injuries suck. Bunny staying because found him during breakdown. Feed and water him, don't let him leave. Unless is Easter, then have him followed or do so personally. Try to avoid foot in mouth.

Jack folded the letter back up, and tucked it back into the drawer. He locked the drawer, and got the key back in the pouch, before he had to lie down again.

But not to sleep.

The letter had jogged his memories. Jack held still while the past several days rushed back to the forefront. Finding Bunny, taking him home. Their talks, their argument, being alerted of the storm and having to leave. The fight was still plenty blurry, probably for the best, but everything else was just as clear as his other memories.

Good. He hated waiting for his memories to come back. It always felt like they never would.

He drowsed until he heard the door open. He cracked open one eye, and then struggled to sit up. Bunny rushed to help him, but Jack was just a little faster than he was.
"You seem better." Bunny looked Jack over, as professional as a surgeon. "Here. Eat up."

"Thanks." Jack accepted the bowl, full of chili. His mouth watered, and he immediately tucked in.

Bunny watched him eat, looking calmer than he had since Jack left to deal with the hurricane. Definitely calmer since the wind had recovered and gone back outside. And his cooking was good, Jack had no complaints. A lot of soups and stews, but that could just as easily have been because of his injuries. Soft food digested better, when a person was injured.

Jack finished the chili without his usual desperation, and handed the bowl and spoon back. "That was good."

"Glad you liked it." Bunny set both aside on the night stand. "You're running a bit low on some things. And I don't know how to leave."

Jack ignored the last bit with a bit of selective hearing. "I can trade for what I'm low on. I should be up and about by tomorrow, earliest. How long was I out?"

"Out fighting hurricanes or out cold recovering?" Bunny wondered. The skin around his eyes was tight, but he otherwise looked unbothered. "You were about three days away, don't know how much of that was spent fighting. You came back late on the third day. And then you were mostly unconscious for the rest of the week… or four days. Can't remember what day it is."

"Is this day four of recovery or day five?"

"Morning of day five. Ah, Jack?" Bunny asked, eyebrows low over his eyes. Now he was starting to look worried. "That dog…?"

Right, right. Jack eyed the wardrobe, and considered his chances of getting up, getting a nightgown out and on, and getting back to bed before collapsing. Maybe another meal first. "The wind," he said. "The wind doesn't like being inside, and taking a physical form is apparently very limiting, but when exhausted, the dog's the easiest. Australian cattle dog," he added, unable to help the confusion in his voice.

"… Long as it's not a real dog, I guess," Bunny said. He looked from Jack to the wardrobe, and then shrugged. "Need to check that wound in your gut, then I guess you can put something on. Not too many bandages left to change."

"Believe me, I'm thankful you helped me." He'd had a few bad fights before, and dragged himself home. But there hadn't been anyone then, other than the wind. It made a nice change, someone else stitching him up and splinting his broken bones. But… did he really have to be naked?

It just seemed so… rude.

Bunny took the dishes out, and then returned with Jack's minuscule first aid kit. Considering how badly he was usually injured, he probably needed a bigger one. But considering how rarely he needed to use it, he hadn't bothered.

Bunny whisked the sheet away from Jack. Jack flushed, feeling heat bloom in his cheeks and travel halfway down his chest, but didn't try to cover himself up or cringe away. As a child it'd been normal to run around in his birthday suit; even getting older, on wash day, everyone stripped down, bathed, washed the clothes, and did what chores they could while naked. Clothes were just what you wore to stay warm, dry, and not offend the neighbors.

That being said, he wasn't sure he was entirely comfortable with the calculation in Bunny's eyes.
Bunny's attention might have been focused all of two, three inches above Jack's groin, but he doubted there was a guy alive comfortable with that much judgement for that area of the body.

Especially when his showing was less than impressive.

Bunny cut the bandages off, and peeled the Teflon pad away from the wound. The wound underneath was smaller than Jack remembered it being, as was only to be expected, but was still red and raw. He'd seen enough infected wounds to recognize one on his own body, but it looked like the infection was dying off.

"So what'd you hit? Assuming it wasn't the hurricane."

"Hurricanes can't do much, even when named." Jack hissed when Bunny started cleaning the wound, but did his best to ignore it. "Most they can do is blow stronger in my direction, of throw a bit of hail or lightning at me. Hail's ice, lightning is easy to dodge if you're not grounded. This was a stump." He scowled down at the injury.

"A stump?" Bunny paused in his work, and then considered a fresh Teflon pad. "You were blown into a stump?"

"Somewhere in there, yeah." Jack shrugged, which thankfully didn't hurt. Bunny pressed the pad to the wound, and he automatically covered it with one hand so the Pooka could wrap bandages around him. The bandaging was done quickly with the both of them, and Jack relaxed when Bunny turned back to the small first aid kit, no longer squinting at him.

Bunny got him a nightgown from the wardrobe, the light blue one he preferred, and Jack pulled it on. Something to be said for that one theory, clothes being a kind of armour. He felt much better now.

"So why don't you tell me what stocks I'm low on," Jack said. "Actually, can you help me limp outside? If I don't get some sunlight, I'm going to go crazy."

Chapter End Notes

So I've been noticing my spelling has switched over to the British/Canadian standard (Colour, flavour, ect) but I don't seem to be all the way consistent with it yet. Not exactly helpful when work computer, Google Docs, and my computer (sometimes) says that's wrong, even when set to Canadian spelling. So if I spell colour several different ways, well, that's why. 90% of the time...

Also, yes, Jack occasionally still has memory issues. Not really that big a deal, it's easy for Baby Tooth to give him a jolt if a self-addressed letter doesn't do the trick.
Aster had no idea how Jack could remain so calm. He'd almost died, and he barely turned a hair. When he'd been nominated for Guardianship he'd argued, dug in his heels, and generally acted like an angry brat, but serious injuries? Nothing.

His hands still wanted to shake. Might've been exhaustion, he allowed; he'd spent most of every night in a chair beside the bed, trying to stay awake long enough to keep an eye on the winter spirit. If he could've, he'd have taken Jack to North's, to the yeti and the trained medical staff. Instead he'd been forced to work with the scant field surgery he'd learnt in the Brotherhood, surgery that had been for a completely different species.

He hadn't been able to relax until the second night, when several cuts had closed up and vanished, literally within an hour. Jack had woken up and eaten not long after that, and as if that was some kind of trigger, wounds vanished left and right. Bones knit together in the space of hours, scrapes turned into bruises which faded away, cuts closed up and left nothing, not even a scar. Only the nasty puncture low on Jack's stomach remained, and even that was a quarter of the size.

Not an unusual speed for a Pooka to heal. A bit fast, but shapeshifters could rejoin torn flesh with nothing but will alone. Losing limbs was not permanent, either reattaching the torn flesh immediately, or growing a new one once recovered from the trauma. Scarring had been mostly unknown as well.

But in a human… even a human spirit…

He stretched out on the ground, one hand wrapped around Jack's ankle. The ground felt very solid under his back, and he needed that.

"You're quiet," Jack observed, slumped over on the bench, looking ready to fall asleep.

"Tired. You had me worried."

Jack grinned, radiating satisfaction. "Yeah? Nice to know you care. Nice to be waited on hand and foot, that hasn't happened since…” He opened his eyes and frowned. "Never. It'll feel weird now, you'll have to stop."

Aster huffed. "Wanker. Thought you were going to die."

"I'm tough. And I heal fast, obviously."

Yes. Pooka fast.

Aster studied Jack as the winter spirit turned his face up to the sun. No, he decided, rather regretfully. Nice as it'd be not to be the Last, Jack was no Pooka, or part-blood. He was the first, and only, Pooka to be here on Earth. He'd have noticed if anyone else had showed up, and even if they somehow snuck past him, Sandy or Manny would have notified him.

It was as he'd long suspected - there were no more Pooka. Just him.

"So, what stock am I low on?" Jack asked. He frowned down at Aster; it was hard to remember that
Jack couldn't read minds, with the winter spirit wearing that thoughtful expression. Easier to distract himself, focus on other things. Like all the food he'd cooked up for Jack, all the food he'd wolfed down himself.

He'd gained weight. Somehow, lack of sleep and plenty of fretting, he'd gained weight. Not much, but his hipbones were less obvious, under the fur. He didn't think it make him look any different, but he felt different, especially down in that greedy gut of his. His stomach no longer dipped in under his ribcage and above his hips.

"You're about out of flour, wheat, and oats. You should get yourself some rice, I could whip up a nice stir fry or curry some night. Give you a change."

"I'll put it on the list," Jack said, some wicked spark of mischief dancing in his eyes. "Anything else?"

"Did you know you used the last of your beef that first dinner? And the bacon before you hared off to wrestle with a hurricane?"

Jack nodded. Good, so that wouldn't be a surprise.

"Didn't feel right thinning your chicken flock… not that I found it," he added, aggrieved. Granted, he hadn't dared leave Jack for long, but he had looked. Eggs were a nice source of protein.

Jack chuckled. "I'll show you, once I'm steadier. And I'd like to give it a little longer before I take a bird for the pot. So some meat would be nice, huh?"

Aster looked away, pretending nonchalance. "Well, you know, wouldn't turn it down. I fixed your garden, by the way. Gonna take the odd nudge to keep it all in the right season. Poor plants can't figure if it's early spring or late autumn."

He saw Jack nod from the corner of his eye. "I can't get the temperature much warmer than this," he said. "It'll get colder, I get snow same as everyone else in Pennsylvania, but I've never had to worry about air conditioning. Probably the winter spirit thing."

"Probably," Aster agreed, utterly confused. His own Warren was regulated through technology, not magic, though North would have argued that definition. And his egg fields aside, he'd long ago stopped caring what plants grew in the caverns, or how well they did.

"Couldn't find any more wood to cut up for you, so you're low on that." Aster realized he was rubbing his thumb against Jack's ankle seconds before the winter spirit did. He looked away from a warm, bright smile, and deliberately let go.

"That's fine. The wood, I mean. I'll just hop over into the Native American's Summerland, grab a redwood branch or something. That'll be plenty of wood for a couple of weeks."

"Should you be doing that with a hole in your gut?"

Jack waved his question off. "I'll get help." At Aster's dubious look - granted, most of their interactions had been of the antagonistic variety, but he'd never heard of Jack asking for help - he grimaced and nodded. "I will. I'll tap whichever image on that cross stitch you want me to."

There was a rabbit on that cross stitch. "Your promise is enough," he decided. "Don't need proof."

Jack looked surprised, and then delighted. "Sure. I'll even wait a day for the heavy stuff."
"And you'll show me how to leave," Aster said.

The winter spirit hummed in what he decided was agreement. They fell into a mutual quiet, and Aster, at least, drowsed. The wind sighed through the trees, and off at the back of the cabin he could hear the bees humming. Birdsong, a little muffled, probably from outside Jack's domain. The quiet sound of Jack breathing. It was all very peaceful.

"Bunny?" He flicked an ear in acknowledgement. "When I found you."

Oh. Jack might as well have hit him with a blast of frost. Ice streaked up and down his spine, and settled in his gut. "Yeah?"

"Can you tell me about it?" Jack asked, his voice horribly gentle. Aster could have handled a harsh demand, or brash mockery. He had experience with both. But this tender handling? It did nothing for the lump in his throat, or the howl of grief that built in his chest.

He breathed in, the breath shuddering through him. "Pooka - we build shrines for our dead," he said, testing each word carefully. "To…"

Jack leaned forward. "Bunny?"

"The shrines are to keep 'em alive."

Jack was silent. It was better than questions, but… it would've been easier to keep talking if there'd been questions.

"They're only dead when they're forgotten. Bodies might go, but as long as there's a shrine, kits and grandkits to remember their names…" He sat up, and curled around his knees. "It's not like becoming a spirit. Or a ghost. Different kind of existence, you could say. The shrines… You can't think about someone every minute of every day, can you?"

"No," Jack murmured. His hand settled between Aster's shoulder blades, light as thistledown. After a few seconds, he pressed down more firmly, the warmth of his palm strange, anchoring.

"The shrines help with that. Because you haven't forgotten. They're remembered. Even…” He began to shake, and clenched his eyes shut. "Even when you can't remember their names. Or their faces. Even when - they're still -"

Jack moved, knelt in front of him. Aster was wrapped up, an arm around his shoulders and a hand pressing against the back of his head. He dug his claws into the loose flannel and pressed his face to Jack's shoulder. Unshed tears itched at his eyes, but he held them back with a force of will.

"I shouldn't think they need names," Jack said. "And their bodies are gone. As long as you remember their essences, Bunny, you still remember them."

No one had ever said that before. All at once, he lost his struggle and keened his grief. And relief. Names didn't matter, faces didn't matter, because he did. He remembered his mother and father, brother, cousins. Friends and neighbors, others of the Brotherhood. He did remember them.

He remembered them, and they weren't dead.

He hadn't failed them.

Jack would never know the weight he'd just knocked off Aster's shoulders. Aster wouldn't tell him. It would make things… awkward.
Chapter End Notes

Alright, time for a quick little headcanon on Pookan beliefs. As long as the dead Pooka is remembered, they, in essence, continue to exist. From the looks of things, there doesn't seem to be much if anything by way of a heaven or afterlife, so once no one remembers you existed... that's it, you're gone. And that means Bunny, as the Last and Only remaining Pooka... well.

No one's memory is perfect. No one can remember every single name of every single member of an entire species of hundreds of thousands.

There's a bit of stress, in having to remember so many people.
The cabin smelled of gingerbread and cinnamon, pine and the crisp, not-exactly-scent chill of fresh snow. Aster breathed in deeply, his mouth watering in anticipation while his ears twisted in annoyance. Christmas preparation was well underway, and he was already tired of it.

He shook the last of the snow off his feet, and hung his scarf up on the coat rack that had appeared some weeks back, along with the first snowfall and a selection of warm, winter gear. Jack had done so very subtly, for him, which meant he'd skipped the brass band and merely stomped around, wrestling the stand into place. The hats and scarves were for Aster, since Jack hardly needed them. The Pooka suspected a woolen coat was in his near future, and honestly couldn't say how he felt about that.

"What do you think?" Jack called, even more sensitive to drafts and chills than Aster. So of course he noticed the door opening and closing, even from the kitchen.

Aster shook his head, and crossed the room to the archway. "There's space for a pine, after, but nothing worth cutting down here. You're missing the evergreens, mate."

Jack frowned, and pointed at a mixing bowl. "Most of them are so short lived though. And I've never needed a Christmas tree of my own, before."

Aster picked up the mixing spoon, but didn't plunge it into the waiting... what was that, pudding? "What, never?" he asked. Jack, who had apparently woken up December first just as Christmas-crazed as North. Jack, who had been in a frenzy of baking the entire month, who'd been pestering Aster for a list of things he'd like, an actual list, like commercialism was something to celebrate. Jack had decorated with means both magic and mundane, so his entire domain looked like a winter wonderland.

The string lights, somehow working without a power source, blinked in time to music.

All that, and Jack had never had a Christmas tree of his own before this?

"Stir," Jack ordered absently. Aster sighed, and did so. Jack was hardly shirking; he had flour in his hair and on his sweater, a smear of what was probably vanilla across his nose. His sleeves had been shoved up to the elbows, and he was breathing hard, rolling out yet another sheet of cookie dough. "And never had anyone to spend the holiday with, so why would I have a tree?"

Aster paused in his stirring. "Are you going to all this..." Words failed, so he twirled the spoon in the air once, carefully so as not to splash or drip. "Because you've got me captive?"

Jack grinned, eyes dancing with mischief. "Holidays are better when they're shared," he said, almost primly. "So, we need to get a tree..."

Aster sighed, and shook his head. "Fine." There was no fighting this, might as well yield. "You realize this means you'll have to let me out."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. You can leave any time."

Sure he could. His tunnels didn't work, he didn't have one of North's snow globes, and still didn't
have permission to go into the Native American spirits' domain. He had no idea how he was supposed to leave, but he could go any time he wanted. Jack had taken him captive, and clearly had no interest in letting him go.

He really shouldn't have found it as endearing as he did.

Jack leapt into the air and twirled, landing on one foot. "What do you want for Christmas?" he asked.

Bunny frowned at him, but the genuine irritation was gone, replaced by a kinder mockery. "Socks," he declared. "Nice, warm, woolen socks."

"Careful, Bunny. Tell me that and I might carry through with it." He twirled his staff in a quick one-two around his hand, and then hopped up onto the crook while it was still settling into the snow. "C'mon. Anything."

Bunny shoved him off his staff. Jack let him; he flopped on his back, and began making a snow angel. And unlike the poor mortals, when he finished, he was able to float up off his creation instead of leaving hand- and footprints on the edges.

"Well?" He wasn't whining. Just wheedling. There were a few similarities, but not as many as people thought.

Bunny glanced back towards the cabin, and then shook his head. "Never mind."

Oh, this again. Jack didn't roll his eyes, though he really wanted to. "I've told you before, mi casa es su casa."

He shoved down a sudden, almost instinctive worry that Bunny would vanish on him. He hadn't secured permission for Bunny to wander around Summerland with him, so they couldn't go tree hunting in the Native American's domain. Pity, there were some nice trees there. On the other hand, they'd probably disapprove of him trying to cut down a tree in celebration of some White Christ holiday.

But he really didn't want to show Bunny how easy it was to get out of his domain.

Unless…

That could work.

"Jack," Bunny said, completely ignorant of Jack's tricky brain coming up with a way to keep him even longer. "I don't want anything. Really."

"That'd be more believable if you didn't look so sad, Fur-belly." He did, too. All slumped shoulders and tired-looking eyes. He looked like he could do with a hug, except Jack had clumps of snow clinging to his sweater and that way led to shrieking about the cold and getting shoved away and into a tree.

Jack may or may not have had experience with that, by now.

Bunny rolled his eyes, the corner of his mouth twitching upwards in a wry little smirk. "My belly now, Frostbite? Next you'll be comparing me to North." He patted his stomach, which was very slightly convex instead of concave, finally.

"Nah, you're not nearly old enough," he joked, and ignored Bunny swallowing his tongue. So
Bunny was older than North. Jack was older than North. Probably. North's age was safe to mention, as compared to mythical sinking islands and friendly, neighborhood dream-stars. "But no. If you could have any present in the world, what'd you ask for? Me, I'd get a never ending supply of pixie stix."

Bunny looked horrified. It probably wasn't fake. "El-Ahrairah's star spangled ears, no," he breathed.

"Oh, come on!"

"If you're not allowed coffee what makes you think I'll let you have one of those things?"

Jack had to stop walking just so he could laugh properly. Between the slender maple tree and his staff, he stayed upright. Mostly. "It's cute how you think you can stop me. Really. Adorable."

Bunny ruffled his hair, and continued on towards the fence.

Jack caught up quickly enough. "Fine, then. I guess I'd wish for Morwen's door."

Bunny hesitated half a step. "Who's door?"

"Enchanted Forest Chronicles, haven't read them for you yet. Morwen's a witch in the Enchanted Forest. She has one door for every room in her house, including guest bedrooms, a library, and I don't know what else. Her house looks like a single-room cottage, even smaller than mine."

Though really, he didn't need any more room. And most guests were more comfortable curled up on the floor in front of the fire; animal spirits had different standards of comfort from human. Since Bunny quite obviously preferred Jack's bed to the floor, it was pretty obvious which side of the line the Pooka stood on. Jack could only wonder that there were people who thought otherwise.

"North," Bunny suggested.

"I did ask, actually. He was either speaking gibberish or Russian… or maybe gibberish in Russian," Jack mused. "Impossible, apparently. Especially if you want people to survive using any of the rooms. Domains are one thing; ten rooms all simultaneously sharing the same space and same access point, a complete other thing."

The garden ended just before them, and the fence seemed to shimmer into view. The fence was an ordinary, split-rail construction, there was no reason for it to have appeared invisible before now, but there it was. Jack supposed it was the spells on the fence, which caused a kind of heat-shimmer around the wood. The snow had settled around the fence, but not on it. And the shadows were ever so slightly wrong.

There were two gates, with only ten feet of fence between them. Jack pointed to the left fence. "That'll take you to the Native American's Summerland," he said. Then he pointed at the right fence. "Gimme a second, I don't think you want to come out in the Antarctic."

"Uh, no," Bunny said, and eyed the second gate with obvious suspicion. Jack smirked, and sauntered over to it.

He'd have to remember to go over the fence when he needed to head out. Moment he let go of the gate, it'd be set for a mountain somewhere in Antarctica, for a few weeks at least.

"Here," he said, and pulled it open. "You first."

Bunny frowned at him, and then stepped through. And paused. "Nothing seems different."
"Of course not, the gate leads to Burgess Forest right now." Everything but the gate to Summerland did, but no need to mention that.

Bunny shook his head, and moved to the side so Jack could follow him through the gate. Which he didn't need to do, but it lent veracity to his claims, so why not?

"Do you need to do anything special for getting back?" Bunny asked, as the gate and fence went back to being almost impossible to see.

Jack shook his head, and started down the hill. "I can get in from a couple different places," he said. For instance, the other side of the hill by the bike path. "So, do you want to open a tunnel? Where's the best place to pick up a pine tree, anyways?"

"Or a fir," Bunny said, staring up at the sky. "Hm. Right then, let's go."

Bunny tapped open a tunnel, and waved Jack in first.

Traveling the tunnels was always a hoot, like snowboarding down an expert slope and riding the world's craziest roller coaster all rolled in together. Bunny raced just ahead, swearing every time Jack crowded in close. The wind was happy enough to give Jack a ride, close confines or no; the excitement made up for being surrounded by earth and tree roots, apparently.

Bunny made a terrific leap, a land-bound dolphin breaching the surface, and Jack followed, spinning to shed momentum faster.

"Where are we?" Jack asked, looking around, wide-eyed. He was certainly no stranger to pretty woods, not even - or especially - ones gilt silver with snow and ice. But still, this seemed something special.

For one thing, there wasn't a single sign any humans had been here… ever. The air was clear, with that particular crystalline clarity Jack had only seen in a few places before; outside North's Workshop, the top of the Mahalangur Himalaya range, and the Ross Ice Shelf in Antarctica. He was sure there were other places, too, but those were the ones that came to mind.

For another, in every direction he looked, the snow seemed undisturbed. There weren't even animal tracks, or places where snow had fallen from the branches onto the ground. Humans would have made trails, either hiking, or snowmobile, and there would have been a scent, a sound - some sign that things were altered, even if by only several degrees.

"Balsam firs," Bunny murmured, as though reluctant to break the quiet. "Figure if you're looking for a Christmas tree, might as well get one of the best."

Jack nodded, and began walking carefully across the snowpack.

The fir trees didn't grow closely together, like they did at tree farms and in deciduous forests. Rather the firs were in small clumps, three to five trees at any one time, and stretches of several feet to several yards between each clump. They must have been very far north, Jack thought; the trees grew in the little pockets of better soil, amongst the rock-strewn fields.

"A smaller tree would be better," he told Bunny, "Give it time to grow, right?"

Bunny grinned. "And we have to carry it back, somehow."

"Oh, that part's easy." Jack reached into his sweater pocket, and pulled out a snow globe. He turned it back and forth, and then put it back in his pocket. "Snuck it off North at the last meeting."
Which had been at his home. It hadn't been nearly as uncomfortable as he'd expected, and it had the added bonus of, well, keeping Bunny in his domain.

Jack frowned a little to himself. He should tell Bunny how to come and go - properly tell him. Bunny would come back. Probably. He doubted it, though, just a little, so... he kept quiet and ignored every pointed comment about captive Pookas and hostage-taking winter spirits.

He wasn't about to say it was for Bunny's own good, but... it kind of was.

"Well." Jack shoved the questions over dubious moralities aside. "You're the plant expert."

"I am," Bunny agreed. He ploughed through the snow, leaving a trail that, if they were in a more settled area, would have confused trackers for days, at least. Really big rabbit. Maybe that was how the Bigfoot myth had gotten started. If it was, Jack knew a couple spirits that owed their existence to the Pooka and his big feet.

Jack hung back and watched Bunny judge the individual trees. The Pooka felt a branch here, sniffed the bark there. He nibbled on needles and felt the earth at the base of the trees. Jack followed, keeping an eye out for trouble.

The picture-perfect scene quickly turned to something more realistic. Birds began to sing - or squawk at each other - and every so often one would take off with a shower of snow and a whirr of wings. Wood creaked as the wind blew the tree branches back and forth. It might not have been a picture, but it was exceptionally lovely all the same.

Bunny circled four trees, three large with spreading boughs, and one smaller and... less perfect. The bigger three were perfectly conical, as straight and symmetrical as nature allowed. The fourth listed slightly to one side, and several branches had been torn off, probably by the weather.

"This one," Bunny decided, touching the little tree with a finger. "It'll grow better in your domain. Smaller, so we won't break our backs carrying it. And the roots aren't tangled with the others. Do you want to grab another, just so there'll be a partner to make seeds with?"

"Maybe in another year or two. Right now, let's just take this one." Jack studied the little tree - little, it was a foot taller than he was - and nodded. It wasn't perfect, but perfection could be highly intimidating. The tree wasn't growing so well here, so there was that, too; moving it somewhere it could properly fill its potential. Properly decorated, the sideways list and the missing branches wouldn't be noticed, and it would make a nice addition to his garden when spring thawed the ground.

"How much earth do you want?" he asked, and crouched to examine the ground. Not like Bunny had; the Pooka had muttered something about soil composition when he'd first broached the idea of a living Christmas tree. Jack was examining it, sending his senses down in search for the permafrost.

"About as far around as the clear spot under the boughs." Bunny tapped the base of the trunk. "And I think there's a rock under the poor thing, so a bit of shallow earth will do."

It was about six, almost seven feet across the clear spot, but Jack could clear out space in the sitting room if he needed to. As for a rock or something under the tree, he didn't know about that, but it was like the permafrost bulged up under this one spot, limiting how deep the roots could go.

Probably a rock. That could carry a bit of subterranean chill up higher than normal.

"Back up a bit," he warned, and pressed both hands flat against the ground, staff between his palms and the snow-covered dirt.
Oh, this was a good spot for what he was going to do. Jack grinned, and carefully drew more moisture into the soil here. The dirt was frozen, but as he worked it slowly turned into something more like frozen mud. Then, he layered the moisture just above the permafrost, starting the ice lens almost a single ice crystal thin. He built it, holding it steady in his mind so the rock didn't break underneath the sped-up weathering. That could come later, he honestly didn't care. He was just using a natural phenomenon to heave the earth up in this one spot, without disturbing tree roots or any neighbors.

One reason to turn everything in the area to frozen mud. Dirt had a kind of cohesion. It crumbled, but it packed together. Mud, on the other hand, was just a slop, even frozen.

The tree began to list further, as the earth humped up underneath it. Jack did his best to ignore the tree trunk threatening to brain him, and with a twist of will and frost made the frozen ground heave up.

… There'd probably be a palsa here when he was done, completely out of place. He'd feel bad, but the addition to the permafrost wouldn't last, and a few spring thaws would probably get rid of his work, like it'd never happened.

At the moment, though, the tree teetered and began to fall, mud cracking and wood groaning.

Bunny caught the tree by the trunk, and did - something - that propped it back up without his having to hang onto it. "What happened?"

"Dirt's mud, now, and even frozen it breaks easier than dirt." Jack stood up, and circled the tree. Yeah, he'd done good. A few root tips poked out around the edges, but the shallow scoop of earth was mostly intact. "Right. Do you want the front or the back?"

Bunny shook his head, and stooped down. "Draw that tree down across my shoulder," he said. "You can have the front."

"Shouldn't I have the back? I'm shorter." The back would probably be heavier…

"Just - let's get this thing back, we're going to move fast enough it won't really matter."

Jack shrugged. "Alright." He hooked his staff around the trunk, and drew it towards him until the bark just touched Bunny's shoulder. Bunny wrapped an arm around the trunk, and stood up. Jack quickly got in position under the upper part of the tree, managing to fit between the branches. He couldn't see a thing, because there were a bunch of needle-covered branches in front of him, but they were just going to go straight ahead.

He tossed the snow globe ahead of him, focusing on the front lawn between his cabin and his garden. The portal opened the way it was supposed to - he'd seen North use his portals to come and go, but he'd still been a little nervous - and began walking forward.

Thankfully, they didn't have to go far. Jack started walking slower than Bunny had, so he'd been shoved forward. Then he'd sped up and Bunny slowed down, and he'd been dragged back. And then they were through the portal and could put the tree down.

Bunny swiped at his chest and shoulders. "I'm covered in sap."

"Sauna?" Bunny might have been covered in sap, but there were needles in his hair and stuck to his sweater.

"I should really get this thing in a proper root ball…"
"It's winter. Pretty sure an hour or two won't hurt it."

Bunny nodded. "You get the rocks going, I'll get the water?"

Jack shrugged. "Sure. I'm going to have a bath, though. I'm not sore enough to put up with the humidity."

"I'd think, with your powers, you'd like more humidity in the air."

"Not when I feel like I'm melting. C'mon, Cottontail, you're starting to shiver."

Jack relaxed in the bathtub, once their individual labours were complete. Bunny had kept filling the kettle for his bath, long after the water butt in the sauna had been filled. By the time the tub was full, the rocks were properly heated, and they both retired to their respective spots with sighs of relief. Most days, Jack was happy with how he lived, but there were times that indoor plumbing and turning things on with the flick of a switch became very appealing.

The renovations would take forever, though. Like every time before, the amount of work just wouldn't be worth it.

Maybe an addition or two, though. A library, maybe an entertainment room so he could watch TV shows and movies when he wanted, instead of when he could borrow a room from North.

Except if he had his own library he'd hole up on his own and not poke his nose out for decades. An entertainment room would make it worse. This way, he socialized.

Still… there were two people living here now, it might be a good idea to look into expanding.

No separate bedrooms, though. He'd missed curling up around his sister at night, even when he hadn't known he'd had a sister. It wasn't the same, cuddling up to Bunny - for one thing, the Pooka was a great deal bigger than Jack's mother, never mind his younger sister - but there was the same feeling of companionship. The same assurance listening to another person sleeping in the same room. Bunny might have snored like a buzzsaw (and then denied it vigorously when Jack confronted him) but his presence meant Jack wasn't alone.

Bunny was done with the sauna long before Jack was done soaking in the bath. The Pooka shook off inside the sauna, and exited just long enough to hiss at the relative chill and grab a towel to wipe up the drips. He exited a second time, dropped the towel in the woven wicker hamper, and got another towel from the carved chest in the corner.

"You look scrawny," Jack declared. "Like you lost half your weight in there."

"Ah, rack off." Bunny spread a second towel over the chest, and sat down. "Pass me a comb, mate?"

Jack shrugged, and got Bunny's comb off the shelf above the tub. Jack had a brush, cheap dollar store thing, that he rarely used. Bunny had a finely carved wooden and mother of pearl comb, a gift from Tooth he apparently kept 'forgetting' at North's.

He hadn't 'forgotten' it recently, though Tooth had rescued it from North's pocket during their last meeting.

"What is with you and this comb?" he asked, stretching his arm up and back.

Bunny snorted, and started combing the fur on his arm. "Long story."
"I like your stories."

"Alright, settle back." Bunny scowled, and switched arms. "So when we first met, Tooth was… taken… with my teeth. I thought that meant she was taken with me, and wasn't interested…"

Chapter End Notes

So, PLEASE don't ask me how frost heaving works, even with the simplified explanations found on Wiki, I still don't entirely get it. (Well, what I understand is that it's ice that forms in a horizontal layer in the ground, and over the course of years expands, breaking rocks and lifting earth. Jack just sped it up.)

I have, however, found some pictures.
Anatomy of a frost heave here:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/63/Anatomy_of_a_Frost_Heave.jpg
What it can do to a road:
https://farm6.staticflickr.com/5226/5606131185_c28b3389d5_b.jpg
Ice segregation, which is a form the ice heaving can take:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Melting_pingo_wedge_ice.jpg

Basically, ice heaving is pretty neat, even if I don't understand it. And yes. Not only is Bunny celebrating Christmas, Jack STILL isn't explaining how he can leave. Fortunately Bunny finds it cute…
Jack handed Bunny a string of popcorn. "Put this around the top. Are you sure you don't want anything for Christmas?"

Bunny sighed, and shook his head. "Not really. Things I want, you can't really wrap them."

Point, good point. How many Christmases had Jack spent wishing for company? Or a family? That wasn't why he was asking, though. "Look, I can get you socks and scarves and candy for under the tree, but if I don't know what you want, how can I try to get it for you?"

Bunny adjusted the popcorn string, tweaking a single puff of corn so it looked better. "You sure about the candles? Don't think you want the thing to burn down or anything."

"A living, well-watered tree. Tea candles secured in holders. There won't be a lot, and they'll only be lit for a short time. It'll be fine." Jack pinned a cluster of carved and painted berries to one twig. Red was a normal color, for holly berries, but the glitter was a thankfully false note, even if it was pretty.

Bunny grunted, and picked up another string of popcorn without prompting. Good. Jack wasn't asking for a "high ho, high ho, a Christmas time we go" attitude or anything, but he didn't think it was too much to ask for non-gloom. General contentment would be nice. Besides, Christmas in general wasn't a bad thing, and there was no reason why the Easter Bunny shouldn't celebrate peace on earth and goodwill towards men just like everyone else.

No reason why Santa shouldn't participate in Easter Egg hunts, too, but Jack would leave the plotting for the New Year.

"What do you want for Christmas," Bunny asked.

"A camera," Jack said, still thinking about possible angles of plotting for Easter. "One that'll take pictures of spirits. Wait, what?"

"Too late, Frostbite." Bunny took a handful of tinsel, and began distributing it on the tree one strand at a time. "Have you told North you want this camera? Because I'm stuck here and can't go shopping."

"Stuck? Who's stuck? And I thought that was the main point of the next meeting. Telling North what to get us so he doesn't tear his hair out." Jack hung a sparkly glass ball off another twig, poking at it until he was sure it wouldn't slip off and smash on the floor. He nudged Bunny out of the way and hung another.

"It's so the arse can brag," Bunny muttered, and went back to distributing tinsel.

There would probably be some bragging. North wasn't perfect, and it was coming up on Christmas. But Jack wouldn't let it go too far; this was his house, after all. And Bunny was his guest. North was his guest too, but he'd go home in the evening.

"Well, what are you going to ask North for?" Maybe he'd get an idea from that…

"Paint brushes." Bunny wrinkled his nose. "They're always worn out after Easter painting, so I
always need new ones. Might as well make North get 'em for me."

Jack sighed. Yeah, so that wasn't going to work, unless... "What's your favourite art style? Eggshells? Or something else?"

Bunny paused, staring off into nothing. Or maybe into the past. "I used to dabble in pretty much everything," he admitted. His ears drooped. "Gave it up, after... well, you know."

After Pitch destroyed his home a third time, and Bunny had resolved he didn't deserve one. Jack nodded. "But you enjoyed it? Just painting, or did you carve too?"

Bunny side-eyed him. "I don't want to wake up and find you've gotten me an easel and canvas. I don't have the right brushes or paints, anyways."

"Just interested, Cottontail. Why do you have to ascribe sinister motives to my every act?" Jack pressed a hand to his chest. "I'm hurt. Stabbed through the heart. I thought you were my friend."

"I ascribe sinister motives because I know you." But he smiled as he said it. "And... I don't know. I dabbled, like I said. When I was working, it was just a hobby, an hour here, hour there. No time to really settle down and do more than dab a bit of paint on something and call it a day. And, ah, after, I might've been a gentleman of leisure but there were still things I needed to work on. Tech stuff."

Jack nodded, and plotted.

... Oh, now that was an idea...

Aster was plotting.

Not that he was going to let Jack know it. Fortunately, the winter spirit could be even more oblivious than North, at least in some things. Besides, Aster was old and canny, he knew how to keep his thoughts off his face.

Jack was adorable when he was trying to be sneaky. He smirked more, got ever so slightly narrow eyed and sly. He walked differently, too, when he'd come up with a particularly delightful plot. Any time he messed with the weathermen, for example, he strutted. Snow days got twinkly little tiptoeing, complete with the odd pirouette. Aster wasn't sure how to classify swaggering, yet, but since decorating the tree Jack hadn't walked normally for more than two or three steps.

And somehow Jack was completely oblivious to his displays.

"When do you think the others will arrive tomorrow?" He stretched out on the bed, sans blankets but comfortable enough in the nightgown. Flannel. Wonderful, warm and snuggly soft. How had he ever slept naked?

" Probably around noon, or they'll try and forget about time zones again." Jack pulled his nightgown on, and raked his fingers through his hair. "I'll set out some nibbly snacks around mid-morning. Do we have any vegetables and dip good enough to inflict on others?"

Aster snorted, and shifted over to the side. "A few. Good thing you baked all those cookies, though. We're... not going to eat all of them, are we?" Any more weight, and he'd need a new belt.

Jack snickered. "Nah. They're for winter spirits I know, plus a few others. And before you ask," he said, as he slid under the covers. "Yes. I do the cooking every year. Decorations and tree, however, is all on you."
"Oh, goodie." Aster got under the covers, and stretched out on his back. Jack promptly shifted his head from the pillow to Aster's arm. Snuggly little beast… Not that he minded, much. "So who are these winter spirits? Are you visiting them when inflicting school zones with snow?"

"Letters, actually. Mostly northern hemisphere. Snow Queen, General Winter, Old Man Winter, a few of the highest ranked Jotun… Yuki-onna and a few people I don't even know what they are, just that they're crazy powerful and aligned with winter." Jack wrapped an arm over Aster's stomach, and sighed. "I figure it's better to stay on their good sides instead of making enemies."

"Reasonable." He wondered if Jack considered any of them friends. From the sounds of things, probably not. "So that's what you scribble all the time. Letters."

"I don't scribble," Jack muttered. "A few bird spirits over in Summerland will deliver letters for me. Normally they wouldn't be able to get away with harassing powerful spirits like that - they're minor birds, not, you know, any of the names - but if they're waiting for a return letter they can be as annoying as possible. Seems to amuse them."

Fair enough. Just another facet of Jack's life he knew nothing about, though, because he couldn't leave. Aster hummed, eyes half-closed, and rolled over. He pinned Jack beneath his body, and had a secure grip the moment Jack realized he was trapped and tried to pull away.

"Hey!"

Aster settled a little more heavily on the winter spirit, though after the initial reaction Jack wasn't trying to get away again. "We need to talk, mate."

Jack looked confused. "We talk plenty now."

"You keep changing the subject every time I bring it up."

Confusion turned into understanding. "Oh for - no, I am not going to kill a bee or spider just because it's inside the house. Deal with it."

Then again, maybe not. "I'm not talking about the wrigglers," even if the bees made his skin crawl and spiders, well… his Warren was in Australia. Enough said. Jack's domain was too cold for snakes, otherwise Aster would have had to go on a rampage with a shovel. "I'm talking about you not letting me leave."

Jack stared over Aster's shoulder. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Of course you -"

"Bullocks!" Aster clenched his teeth. "That gate lets out into a bloody frozen waste, ya wanker! And other one's likely to get me scalped. How else am I supposed to duck out, my tunnels won't work and I don't have any snow globes."

Jack seemed to shrink under him. "You… you want to leave?" he asked, his voice wavering ever so slightly. "I thought you liked it here."

Aster sighed, and pressed his muzzle against Jack's hair. "Of course I like it here," he said quietly. "But Easter will be coming up, and I'll need to prep for it, and I can hardly do that from your domain, can I?"

"I guess not… I'll think of something, Cottontail. Don't worry about it. C'mon, you know you snore if you're on your stomach… or your back…" Jack frowned. "Or your sides. It's a lot less when you're sleeping on your side, though."
"I don't snore!" Aster rolled off Jack, and shuffled about until he was curled up on his side. Jack cuddled up against him, one arm wrapped around Aster's waist.

Aster was almost aslee when he realized; he was still trapped here, with no way out!

… It was starting to get less endearing and more annoying. Really. And he wasn't smiling while he fell asleep, either!

"I smell cookies!" North boomed, eyes gleaming as he took in the decorations. Jack grinned, and stole the old bandit's coat, hanging it up beside the fireplace. "Oh, you have done wonderful job, Jack. Is very merry!"

"I should hope so, as much effort as I put into it." Jack waved North to a chair. "You're early, we don't even have any snacks out yet."

North settled his bulk, and arched his eyebrows at Jack. "We? You are having guest before me? Bah, and here I thought I would be first."

Bunny stepped out of the kitchen, a plate of cookies in one hand and a disgruntled look on his face. "You'll have to get up plenty early in the morning to get here before me," he snapped. "Here." He thrust the plate at North's face. "Help yourself."

"Thank you!" North took the plate, and started munching on a cookie. "Oh, chocolate chip!"

Jack rolled his eyes, and subtly urged Bunny to the side, by the tree. "C'mon, I thought you liked North."

"I'm fine. It's fine."

He poked Bunny in the stomach. Or tried to. Bunny swatted his hand away before he could make contact. "Then what's with this Bun-zilla thing you've got going on?"

Bunny flattened his ears against his head, and glowered indiscriminately at the room. "He's going to ask if I live here."

… That was it? "You… kind of do."

"Not by choice," Bunny growled.

Jack flinched back. "I, uh…"

Bunny suddenly drooped, the anger vanishing like snow in summer. "Never mind, mate, I… we'll talk later, yeah?"

"Yeah, Bunny." Jack smiled, Bunny's hand on his shoulder burning like hot iron. He smiled while Bunny turned and headed back to North, settling down in the other chair. Only when he was sure neither of them were looking at him, did he stop smiling and slump.

He was a horrible friend.

Maybe, in the first week or two, Bunny would've vanished and never been seen again. Jack had been struck by that impulse, a few times in his past three centuries. Unfortunately he'd been trying to hide from people older and stronger than he was. There wasn't anyone older and stronger than Bunny, though, so vanishing had been a very real possibility.
Besides, in the first month, Bunny - apart from that time Jack had been injured - hadn't seemed to think about the world outside. Or at least hadn't seemed to want to think about said world; Jack wasn't a mind reader, so he couldn't say for sure what had gone through that furry skull.

After the first month, though, Bunny had started to ask.

Jack should have told the truth then. "Well, Bunny, it's as simple as hopping the fence. If you want to be civilized, though, you take this gate and not that one..." Only he hadn't.

He'd been keeping Bunny captive, hadn't he? Polite, but that didn't mean much.

Someone knocked on the door, a quick buzz that could only have been Tooth. He had to get it. He was the host, after all, this was his house. He had... duties, certain actions were expected of him.

He'd tell Bunny how to leave. After the others were gone, he'd tell.

He would.

"Bunny, step outside with me."

Aster raised one eyebrow, but grabbed a scarf on his way out the door. "What do you want?" he asked, equal parts curious and annoyed.

The meeting had gone well enough. He'd let a few of North's more annoying jabs slide, too busy keeping an eye on Frostbite and his downtrodden expression. He'd gotten a few concerned looks from Tooth and Sandy, for not rising to the bait. They hadn't noticed Jack's preoccupation, since the winter spirit was rather good at putting up a front.

Just not as good as Aster was at seeing through them.

North walked a few feet away from the door, and stood ankle deep in the snow. Twilight had fallen during the meeting, the early night common at this time of year. Yellow, slanting blocks of light lit up the snow, though the moon and starlight did that well enough. Everything looked softer, every bare tree branch lined in gentle white.

North took a deep breath, and blew it out on a long sigh. Plumes of white streamed from his mouth, rather like smoke from his infrequent pipes.

"Jack seems happy."

Seemed happy, but was secretly miserable. It'd only been a handful of months, but Aster could read him now.

"He does," he agreed. After all, Jack did seem happy.

North shifted his weight back and forth. "You are staying here, yes?" he asked, sounding casual. "You are looking better than I have seen in long, long time."

"I -" Looking better? What did that mean? "Yes," he admitted. "Jack's giving me room to kip here, and..." And not letting him leave. Except he would, of course he would, just... what, not yet?

He wasn't even sure he wanted to leave. Go out, yes, because winter or not, he was starting to get... antsy, staying in one place all the time. But leave? Give up breakfasts with Jack, give up trading dish duty and wood cutting? Give up the nightgown he was thinking of as his and Jack's sleep-cuddling?
"Hah!" North laughed in triumph, and slapped Aster on the back. He almost went into a snow drift. "I thought so! I could feel it… in my belly."

Aster brushed snow off his knees. "Mate, are you still smoking those herbs? I think you should stop."

"Very funny, am sure," North rumbled, as threatening as a distant storm. He brightened, then, enough that his smile rivaled the starlight in brilliance. "Is very good thing, for little Bunny to stay with littler Jack, yes? But why do you never take up my offer of room in Workshop, hm?"

Aster pinned his ears back, muzzle wrinkling a touch. "You're joshing me, yeah?" North always thickened his accent when he pretended obliviousness. "Place never sleeps, and it's always frozen."

"So staying with winter spirit is better idea?"

"Plenty warm inside." What was North getting at, anyways? Aster unpinned his ears and angled one in inquiry.

"I worry, sometimes," North confessed. "It is so easy to isolate ourselves. So simple to say 'no, today I am too busy for the meeting, I will go next time' and to forget. This, you and Jack…"

North turned to Aster, and clapped his hands on the Pooka's shoulders. "This is good. I think. For you, for Jack. You both seem happier. For what little it is worth, in my opinion there is little that could be better. You will both have my support."

It was easy to forget, under the bluster and all the red and green, that North had a good heart. Aster huffed, and stepped close enough to lean against the human's solid bulk. "You're a good mate," he allowed.

If North was surprised by the hug, he didn't show it. His arms were very warm, wrapped around Aster's shoulders and back. His beard tickled against Aster's shoulder. And that dumb hat bent his ear to one side, not entirely comfortably. Good hug, though, definitely one of the better ones Aster had initiated.

They separated, and went back to looking out over the garden. Aster was just about ready to go back in; the chill air was less bracing and more painfully cold, when North cleared his throat. He eyed the human cautiously. North was smirking.

"I am especially pleased to see you two so happy, coming together at Christmas. Was magic of the season, yes?" he asked, and winked. Then he turned and began to saunter off, purely for effect considering the snow globe he was playing with.

Aster raised his eyebrows. "Christmas magic is in June, now?" he asked. Not that he knew exactly which month it'd been, but June was pretty much opposite December.

North stumbled, and turned to look, eyes wide in shock.

… It would have taken a great deal more restraint than Aster held claim to. North presented such a perfect target, after all.

The snowball landed square in North's face.

"And do you two share a bed?" Tooth prodded, eyes gleaming. Jack did his best not to think of it as an evil gleam. No matter how much the way she held her tea cup and sat on the chair made him think
of super spies, deathtraps, and fluffy white cats.

"I only have the one bed, Tooth. I'm not going to make a guest sleep on the floor." Jack traded Sandy a card for a caramel chip, and added it to the pot.

Jack didn't know how to play poker, but Sandy had less of a clue. You didn't trade one's betting items for extra cards, and the game winner didn't have the biggest hand. Probably. Tooth, who did know how to play, was sitting out because Sandy was betting caramel chips and Jack had chocolate.

North, who always gave them an opportunity to arm wrestle if they were out of betting materials, had left already. Bunny, who didn't like card games, had shown him out.

Jack… wasn't going to worry about that. He wasn't. Bunny might leave with North, or he might not. Probably wouldn't. Right?

"Of course not," Tooth murmured, and sipped delicately at her tea. "So, do you wear anything… special to bed?"

Jack looked up from his cards - he had four jokers, which was probably a good thing - and frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Sandy glanced between Jack and Tooth, and then rolled his eyes. He put his cards down, careful not to drop any or show Jack their faces, and then began pantomiming sighing over someone, fluttering his eyelashes, little sand-hearts floating around his head.

Jack gaped at the both of them. "You think me and Bunny -!"

Bunny shot through the door and slammed it behind him. He was cackling.

"Is there a lock?" he demanded, turning to look at the door. "No lock. Hide me!"

He dove across the room, and crouched behind Jack's chair. Jack held very carefully still, and not just because Bunny had quite probably taken a quick trip on the Crazy Train. The Pooka pressed his grin against Jack's thigh, his shoulders shaking.

"Uh," Jack managed. "What?"

"He's gonna kill me," Bunny hissed, sounding anything but displeased with the idea. "Bloody Christmas wanker can't handle a little snow."

Tooth sipped at her tea, and smiled serenely. "Maybe you should hide in the bedroom. You're kind of visible out here."

Bunny jabbed a finger in Tooth's direction. "Too right," he agreed, and skittered off. Jack twisted around in his seat, and watched Bunny close the bedroom door behind him. A moment later, there was the sound of something heavy being shoved across the floor, presumably to block the door.

"What just happened?" he wondered.

Sandy shrugged, and picked up his cards. He pointed at Jack's hand, and then offered four more caramel chips.

"Yeah, no, you don't get fifteen cards for four chips." Jack picked his cards up, but didn't play any of them. "Tooth, it's not like that."

"Sure it isn't. He's only hiding in your bedroom. Your shared bedroom." Tooth set her empty tea cup
down, and sighed. "That was lovely, Jack. I'm going to go keep North from turning Bunny into soup."

Jack rolled his eyes, and nodded. "That'd be nice, I've gotten used to him. North's kinda loud, but I don't think he deserves turned into a pretzel."

"It's cute how you think Bunny would win that fight."

Jack waited until Tooth closed the door behind her, and then turned to Sandy. "Let's be honest… Bunny would totally win."

Sandy nodded, and frowned at his cards. He pulled two out, and put them on the tiny discard pile. Then he tossed three caramel chips into the betting bucket.

They played in silence for a few minutes, before Jack couldn't stand it anymore. "Does everyone think me and Bunny…?"

Sandy looked up, and then elaborately rolled his eyes. A quick sketch of North and Tooth played out over his head; the Tooth figure sighed over the North figure when his back was turned, and the North figure sighed over the Tooth figure when she wasn't looking. Then they sighed over oblivious Jack and Bunny figures, who were doing nothing more interesting than 'talking'.

"Hopeless romantics, got it." His mother had been one. Of course, she'd also been an apprentice village matchmaker, so to speak, learning from her mother-in-law how best to nudge the 'youngens' to their 'proper matches'. She'd been desperately in love with her husband, which - yay for Jack's existence, and his sister's, and also harmony in the household - but she'd been just as desperately in love with… whoever the main character of that book series had been. Something, someone, Old Shatterhand? German, which his dad had delighted in teaching her so he could read her the books. Absolutely nothing like life in America, but fun…

And not the point. Jack shook his head, and went back to the cards.

Some people just needed to see romance everywhere. And sex, he supposed, considering the angle of Tooth's questions. He was a little surprised at North… but maybe that was judging him too harshly. Eyes of wonder, after all… and a core of marshmallow around small children. Tooth was small and delicate in appearance, but tough as a coil of barbed wire inside. That would probably appeal to a knight errant type, the pretty damsel who could knock him down in a fight.

"How long have Tooth and North been dancing around each other?"

Sandy showed a calendar flipping backwards. Very quickly. The eye roll wasn't exactly necessary, but it was descriptive.

"Think they'll leave me and Bunny alone if we get them hooked up?"

The dreamweaver's smile was a slow, delighted expression, promising a great deal of fun and meddling in the near future.

They played for a while after that, quietly trading cards and chips. Jack put the cards away when Sandy indicated it was time for him to go back to work, and then saw the Sandman to the gate.

On the way, he had to swallow down a laugh. The formerly pristine snow looked mauled. Footprints, impact points, and entire body prints had been left in the space between the cabin and the garden, which was still a large enough stretch of space.
"Bunny won," Jack decided.

Sandy shook his head, and mimed shivering from the cold. Which was a good point; North always wore his coat, unless he was in his office, and Bunny only wore scarves. Bunny was a wise enough tactician to retreat if utter defeat seemed likely.

Jack shook his head, and leaned against the fence while Sandy hovered above it. "Bunny wants to leave," he said quietly.

Leave, to a joyless existence without a home, always on guard and never able to rest. Food eaten raw, or burnt over a small fire. Nothing but duty, his work on Easter and his tending the various shrines scattered around the planet. That wasn't even survival.

Leave, and leave Jack behind, with nothing but an empty house and the knowledge that he'd failed. Leave Jack with nothing, no friend and no company, take away the only person he could relax to any real degree around.

Sandy smacked him upside the head. Jack flinched away, and rubbed at the small, forming bruise. "Hey!"

The sandman folded his arms. The images marching overhead were a little fast, but Jack got the gist: he was being an idiot. Sandy slowed down, and showed the images of Jack, a key, and Bunny several times.

"You think… if I give him an open invitation to return, he'd take it?"

Sandy nodded, and patted Jack on the head.

"I'll try it," Jack said, and shoved off the fence. "Thanks, Sandy."

Sandy waved farewell, and floated out into the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Technical kidnapping has become more of an actual captive situation, but Bunny still finds it cute. Let's see if he finds it cute in fifty years, when he STILL has no idea how to get out...
Aster opened his eyes at the pounding noise. Oh. The door. Which… still had the dresser in front of it.

He slunk off the bed and over to the dresser. It was easy enough - easier, now - to shove it back into place. He couldn't see any scratches or marks on the floor, but it was dark. He hadn't brought a candle, and the oil lamp was once more dry. Besides, he didn't have anything to light it with.

"Door's open," he said.

Jack eased it open, and set a lit candle in the holder over the bed. "Hey. I figure we might as well go to bed - unless you're still hungry?"

"Nah, I ate enough earlier." Mostly cookies and slices of spice cake and the like, but it wasn't like it was an everyday thing. Tasty, though.

Jack tossed Aster his nightgown, and paused, one hand on the wardrobe door. "Uh, Bunny?"

Aster got into bed. "What?"

"About earlier, the… the leaving thing…” Jack drew his nightgown out slowly, and looked ready to twist it into a rope and tie a knot in it.

Aster curled in on himself. "I don't want to leave," he admitted, in a small voice he refused to accept was his. He didn't want to leave. But he was only a guest, after all. And guests wore out their welcome, especially when they were as useless as he was. He chopped wood, he helped clean, but that was it. He couldn't read books for Jack in the evening, the chickens went into a murderous rage when they saw him. The garden was under snow and the bees were hibernating, not that he'd be able to do anything with them anyways. Everything he did, Jack could do for himself.

Who wouldn't want to get rid of a freeloader like him?

"I don't want you to leave, either," Jack said. He sat down on the bed beside Aster, and rested one hand on the blanket-covered lump of his shoulder. "I enjoy your company, more… a lot more than you'd guess."

Aster peered up at Jack, suddenly feeling… hopeful. Cautiously so, but still. "I'm a poor guest, though," he reminded Jack.

Who looked confused. "Who says? I think you're a great one. Better than my Uncle was," he added, and shook his head. "Dad never did like his brother, then we found out why. Slob… Never mind."

"Guests are supposed to do for their hosts."

"Pooka custom?" Aster nodded. Jack patted his shoulder. "Human - at least, my human - culture says otherwise. Guests don't do the work. Or if they do, it's the helpful stuff you've already done. You're clean, you're polite, and you don't pick at my habits or my cooking. Good by most standards, and I've never been rich so I don't know about theirs."
His smile would hopefully cover any worry. Jack had sounded very dismissive of the rich. Not that Pooka had cultural standards like humans, rich and poor and middle class… but they'd had social ranks all the same, and he doubted Jack would approve of the highest and smallest rank.

"If you don't want to leave," Jack began, eyebrows furrowing together. "Then why… I mean, I like you as a guest. It's my house, my opinion's the one that matters."

"Well, yes, but," Aster mumbled. He curled up tighter, the corners of his eyes itching.

"I was thinking, actually, of putting up a gazebo."

… What?

Aster squinted at Jack. "What's that to do with anything?"

"It'd keep the snow clear of the ground. Good place for you to set up access to your tunnels. Don't you think?"

His… tunnels? To his Warren, and… oh. "But I wouldn't be leaving," he clarified.

"No," Jack agreed, and stood up. He changed for bed. "No, you're welcome to stay here as long as you want."

Aster relaxed, and closed his eyes when Jack got in behind him. As long as he wanted? Access to his tunnels - who cared where the gates opened to, when his tunnels went everywhere - but he could always, always come back. To, not his place, but Jack's home.

"I'm never going to leave," he murmured.

Jack surprised him, by hugging close to his back. "Good," the winter spirit mumbled. "Forever's good."

~*~

Jack dropped down on the fence, and crouched over like a particularly handsome gargoyle. Clear signs of winter fun marked the backyard snowfield; an uneven snow fort slumped across from the plastic slide and swing set. Some enterprising soul had propped a large toboggan up to provide shelter for those hiding behind the slide. The snow between the two points was torn up with bootprints and gouges in the snow, where the battlers had scooped up ammunition.

Bunny popped up out of a tunnel, and looked surprised when he got tangled in the branches of some ornamental tree. Jack thought it looked a little like a stunted willow tree, with branches that grew down towards the ground instead of up towards the sky like was proper. Bunny could probably name it, but Jack honestly didn't care.

"I thought you dug all the tunnels years ago." Jack hopped down, and helped Bunny untangle his ears.

"Main ones. Little side ones are magic, now." Bunny cleared his throat, and adjusted the scarf wrapped around his neck. "Little nippy, isn't it?"

"Winter, Cottontail. And the real cold front isn't due for another week." He could feel it, almost like an impending headache; a sense of pressure looming over him. The only difference between the cold front and a headache, was when he turned and moved around, the pressure-sense stayed to the south-west, instead of one spot on his head.
"And you're sure the kids want to see me on Christmas Eve?" Bunny didn't, quite, wring his hands... but he looked ready to. Or bolt. Jack smoothed a hand down that tense back, and nodded.

"Sophie asked for you specifically. Are you really going to disappoint her?"

Bunny cleared his throat, and started edging towards the back porch. "What about their parents?"

"Gift wrapping party for the neighborhood. Cupcake came up with it." Jack shrugged. So far as he was concerned, it meant he had the time to stop by and visit with his believers in the neighborhood without drawing parental concern down on a kid. Though, there'd been the odd parent who'd... maybe seen him? And looked equal parts annoyed and worried.

Well, barefoot lunatic running around talking to their impressionable wee babu. That'd be annoying and worrying, he supposed.

"Well," Bunny mumbled, but the back door slammed open before he could fret any further.

"Easter Bunny!" Sophie crowed, darting across the snow-covered deck in stockinged feet. Abby, older but no less noisy, ran after her, barking and jumping.

If Bunny had been tense before, now he was a statue. Jack dug into his pocket, and pulled out a handful of finger sausages.

"Abby!" he called, and caught the dog's complete and total interest. He stepped aside from the furry statue, and quickly ran the dog through her list of tricks. A quick sit-down-roll over-good girl calmed her down enough that she stopped barking, and Bunny started breathing again.

Was the dog paranoia because of reasons, or just because kids figured the Easter Bunny would run from them? North got cravings for milk starting December First until the end of the year, and he didn't even like milk.

He turned back to Bunny, and smiled. Sophie had taken care of any lingering worry on Bunny's part, and also grabbed onto him and wasn't letting go. Her arms were around his neck, probably tight enough to constrict breathing, and her legs were around his waist, and Bunny looked like he didn't know whether to hug her back or call for help.

"Jamie," Jack called, to the boy standing in the doorway. No running in stockinged feet through the snow for him. Smart kid. "Can Abby stay outside while we visit?"

"It's too cold. But I can put her in the kitchen." Jamie grinned, and called the dog. After a wistful sniff at Jack's empty hands, Abby went over to Jamie, and was ushered inside.

Jack moved over to Bunny and Sophie. "Hug her, you goon." He nudged Bunny up the porch stairs.

Bunny wrapped his arms around Sophie, and glared. "What'd you call me?"

"Bunny's not a goon," Sophie said, only a little muffled. "He's my favourite."

Aw, melting rabbit, so cute. Jack grinned, and skipped inside before Bunny, and closed the door with a crook of his finger and just enough of a breeze. Jamie returned from the kitchen, and they all trooped to the living room.

It wasn't just the parents having a gift wrapping party, he saw. His first believers were having one, too.
Cupcake had apparently claimed not only the beanbag chair, but two rolls of glittery paper, one green, one silver. Caleb and Claude were going the gift bag route, with plenty of tissue paper puffs and stealing from each other. Pippa had one end of the couch, Monty the other, and they were sharing cartoon-print paper with each other. Jamie moved to the middle of the couch, and sprawled on the ground.

"I got the chair," Sophie told Bunny, pointing at the piece of furniture in question. Bunny let go of her, but she clung on, a stubborn set to her jaw.

"Alright, but you explain the gray fur." Bunny sat down in the chair, looking highly awkward and not at all sure of himself. Jack considered going over and soothing him, but decided to leave Sophie in charge. She seemed to be having fun, arranging Bunny in the chair and settling comfortably in his lap.

"Abby has gray fur," Jamie pointed out. "Everything's covered in it, a little more won't be noticed."

"Right," Bunny wheezed, looking pained. Probably the knee to the stomach, Jack supposed.

"Settle down, kid, we're not going anywhere for a while." He hopped up on the crook of his staff, and looked around.

Bunny's eyes widened. "We're not?" he asked, and twisted to look at, first the doorway, and then the nearest window.

Cupcake passed over a plate of shortbread cookies. "You have to stay for presents. Have a cookie."

Jack leaned over, defying gravity, and snatched up two. "These look good. Who cooked?"

Monty raised one hand. "Pippa and I did. It was from a package, but…"

And was just a little burnt on the bottom, but still tasty. "It's awesome. Alright, minions, report!"

"Minions?" Bunny asked. He looked from Jack to the children and back again. "Minions?"

"I'm chief minion," Jamie told him. "We handed out those hats and scarves like you told us to, Jack. Are you sure about the Salvation Army, though? Monty found some bad stuff they've done."

"And they have done bad things," Jack agreed. "But there's no reason why the people they help shouldn't get something warm for Christmas. And you went to the other homeless shelters, so the gays and trans people the S-A won't help will still get their share."

"Told you," Pippa said, and poked Jamie in the side with her toes. "Head honcho makes bad choices, the little guy shouldn't be punished for something they weren't involved in."

Jack nodded. Back when the Salvation Army was starting up, it'd done pretty good, but lately it'd gotten bogged down in minor nitpicking over sex, as per usual with religion. There'd either be a split in the army, the more relaxed dissidents splitting from the picky hardliners. Or the relaxed dissidents would wait for the picky hardliners to all die off. He'd seen both happen, over the years.

"Those scarves were for the homeless?" Bunny asked, and took a cookie.

"Every year. At least, after I could knit a straight row. Scarves, hats, gloves. If I had more time, I'd do coats or something too, but…" Jack shrugged. He didn't. Fact of life. Scarves, hats, and gloves were easy, and he could do them while flying. Coats or jackets were quite a bit harder. Blankets were easy, but since he did them all in one piece, he needed a table once it got bulky.
Sophie bounced in place, making Bunny grunt and wince. "We went to the food bank," she enthused. "We brought all the old cans and then we helped decorate for Christmas."

Cupcake wrapped a cereal box in green paper. All of the presents were in some kind of box, even the ones going in the bags. Simplest way to keep a friend from seeing what they were getting, Jack supposed.

"We sold cider and cookies, and donated the extra. Do people really ask for goats for Christmas?"

Bunny secured Sophie with an arm around her waist. "Over in… crikey, you humans keep changing names of places. Country in Africa."

"Middle East too. Big cities are pretty much just like, oh, New York and Detroit, but once you're away from them, well. A goat gives you milk, which you can drink or turn into cheese, or trade for other food. You can train a goat to pull a cart, so you can bring back more water than you can carry. Or the goat can be trained to power a simple mill, to grind grain." They'd used a donkey in Jack's village, but proper goats - not these miniatures and fainting goats - were about the same size.

"Get a kiddie a goat, you're ensuring they'll always have something good to drink," Bunny said.

"Oh." Sophie brushed her bangs back. "We bought three goats with the money we raised. And the leftovers bought medicine."

"Good on ya, the lot of you."

Jack munched on slightly-burnt cookies, and listened to the 'reports'. Jamie had pestered him for weeks after Thanksgiving - Canadian, not American, so it'd been a whole extra month of nagging - for a list of presents they could get him.

He'd asked for donations to charity.

The kids had astonished him, embracing the wish with open hearts and willing hands. They had probably gotten him something physical, too, but the distribution of his knitting, the donations and the work in soup kitchens… Better, even if they hadn't thought of it on their own, he suspected they'd be going back to help more.

The talk wound down. Cupcake had finished wrapping her boxes, and had moved on to braiding Pippa's hair, winding bits of ribbon and coloured paper into her hair. Monty had fallen asleep. Caleb and Claude had vanished into the kitchen and returned with a bowl of popcorn. They traded off tossing pieces at each other, trying to catch them with their mouths.

Sophie nestled against Bunny's chest, looking entirely content with her lot in life. Jamie had been using Jack's shoulder as a pillow, but he'd stood up and wandered off - bathroom, last minute gift to wrap, Jack had no idea - a few minutes ago.

Jamie came back, two bags in hand. He nudged Monty with his knee, and moved over to Bunny while the blond woke up spluttering.

"This is for you," Jamie said. The bag was green and gold, and the tissue paper was just a mess of sunflowers. "And this," he said, holding the second bag out, "is yours."

Jack's bag was blue and white, with sparkly silver tissue paper.

Bunny stared at his bag like it contained a bomb. Or a fruitcake. Jack grinned at him. "What do you bet it's alcohol?"
"Cupcake's not even old enough," Caleb pointed out. "It's not alcohol."

"Alcohol," Jack sang, and pulled out the tissue paper.

It wasn't alcohol. It was a bottle of really fancy looking, well… juice. Cold pressed, fully organic, no pesticides or fertilizers, no preservatives, artificial flavours, yadda yadda… apple juice.

They'd gotten him really fancy apple juice.

Jack started giggling, and had to put the bottle down in case he dropped it. "Awesome," he said, and went back to giggling.

"Wasn't sure what you'd like," Jamie said. He started petting Jack's hair, like Jack was a really big kind of cat. That was flailing a lot, considering the way Jack fell off the couch.

The floor hurt.

"It's great, I love it." Apple juice.

Bunny cleared his throat, and Jack forced himself to sober up. "Well, if you got Jack a bottle of juice, wonder what you figured would be right for me," he said, with only a hint of false cheer and a healthy dose of concern.

Sophie patted him on the cheek. "I picked it out special for you," she promised.

"Makes me feel better, you little rug rat."

"I'm too old to be a rug rat."

"Not to me, darling." He carefully pulled out the tissue paper, and then a box of chocolate. Swiss chocolate, Jack saw, the fancy, decorated and moulded into shapes kind. It was an assortment, which apparently meant everything from milk chocolate - solid, caramel filling, cherry filling, others he couldn't see - to white and dark chocolate.

"You… got me chocolate?" he asked, turning the box back and forth. The plastic wrapping caught the light, gleaming and shining.

"It's not quite as good as yours," Sophie said. "But I wasn't going to save Easter Eggs all the way to Christmas. You're not supposed to re-gift that sort of thing."

"Re-gift?" Bunny asked, turning the box over. He squinted at the ingredient list, and then held the box out and arm's length, continuing to squint.

"Jamie gets a sweater too small for him, but it's perfect for Sophie. Sophie gets, uh… a book, I don't know, that's more Jamie's line than her's. They agree to trade gifts, so they both get what they want, and hey, it's…"

"Aunt Denise," Jamie supplied.

"Aunt Denise for both of them, so who cares? Re-gifting."

"Oh," Bunny stopped squinting at the box, and nodded. "Looks good. About as good as you can get without heading to Switzerland directly."

Sophie squealed, and did her best to strangle Bunny to death with hugs. Bunny looked pleased.
"That was a nice visit." Aster watched while Jack… summoned, or revealed, the gate into his domain. The finer details of magical manipulation had never been his; his Warren was mostly technical, after all. The Pooka had developed pocket dimensions when humans had been discovering magic. The humans had, for the most part, given up the magic in favour of physics, while the Pooka had continued with their technological advances.

Jack’s use of magic was as casual as Aster’s old use of the tech screens. Watching him work was a treat. Sadly, Jack mostly used his magic to manipulate the weather, not exactly something Aster could gawk at.

"It was. The kids surprised me." Jack waved him in, and closed the gate behind them. "What do you think about… Right there, beside where we’re going to put the fir tree? For your tunnel?"

Aster hummed, and did his best to remember how things looked without all this snow. The tree was going into a bit of a depression in the earth; the spot Jack gestured to was a touch higher, maybe all of four inches at the top, and bare of rocks or bushes. It wouldn’t be a large gazebo, but it’d be just big enough for a tunnel entrance and a bit of walking room.

"That could do. What sort of design did you figure?"

Jack beamed, and launched into his ideas. Aster listened happily enough; Jack had clearly put a bit of thought into it. The gazebo wouldn’t be done before Easter, from the sounds of it, but getting the tunnel established wouldn’t take more than a day or two. Aster wondered if he’d be able to set up a permanent tunnel, like he’d used to have all across Europe. The magic ones were safer, closing up on their own even if he forgot, but if this was going to be as permanent as Jack seemed to be planning, it might be worth investing the energy…

Jack continued to talk all through getting inside and brushing the snow off, getting the mugs - warm milk with honey and cinnamon for Aster, hot cocoa for Jack - and settling in front of the fire. At that point, he seemed to run out of words, and stretched his feet out to the fire.

Finally, Jack cleared his throat. "I got the feeling," he said, a smile in his voice if not on his face. "That the kids got you a gift about as appreciated as the one they got me."

Aster sipped at his drink. "You like apples."

"The juice reminds me of my granny's cider, which… wasn't actually that great. Unless you wanted to get drunk. Her stuff went past hard and straight into a fist to the face." Jack wrinkled his nose. "Baked apples, fresh apples, something I can chew, that's all good… but not the juice."

"What would Swiss chocolate do?"

"The juice reminds me of my granny's cider, which… wasn't actually that great. Unless you wanted to get drunk. Her stuff went past hard and straight into a fist to the face." Jack wrinkled his nose. "Baked apples, fresh apples, something I can chew, that's all good… but not the juice."

Jack tilted his half-empty mug at Aster, inviting him to share his side of things.

"The juice reminds me of my granny's cider, which… wasn't actually that great. Unless you wanted to get drunk. Her stuff went past hard and straight into a fist to the face." Jack wrinkled his nose. "Baked apples, fresh apples, something I can chew, that's all good… but not the juice."

"What would Swiss chocolate do?"

Aster found himself grinning, purely in response to the smile Jack was directing at him. "Depends on the kind, and the filling. Swore off experimenting after the sixties. Eighteen-sixties, I mean, not the nineteen-sixties. Dark chocolate's alright, it gets me… something between drunk and high, but milk chocolate, it, uh…" He looked away, no longer smiling. "Y’know, I figure the after-effects might've contributed to our dealings in '68?"
"Bunny, what does milk chocolate do to you?" Jack had *no right* to sound so - so concerned!

Aster clenched his teeth. No, of course Jack had every right to sound concerned. He was a guest in the bloke's house, after all. And they were *friends*. "All chocolate's addictive to me. To all Pooka, actually, we had a similar plant on our planet… sometimes have to wonder if some of the seeds I tried growing actually survived and evolved… Never mind."

He cleared his throat, and stared into his mug. "Chocolate's bad for a Pooka's mind. Emotions. Health in general. The stuff I make, it - it's as safe as it can get, but it's still pretty unpleasant." Both while riding the 'high', and going through withdrawal. Worse for him, now, having eaten so much of it over the centuries.

"Milk chocolate, it, ah, it has effects similar to steroid use in humans. I stopped, practically right away -" Practically wasn't *good enough*, but details. "- but the withdrawal went on a ways."

He tossed down the last of his drink, and sighed. "So chocolate isn't good for Pooka."

"Yeah, no." Jack swirled the last of his cocoa in his mug, and then finished it off. "Hey, Bunny? How do you feel about really fancy apple juice?"

Aster blinked, and then chuckled. "Are you trying that re-gifting thing, mate?"

"Hey, I like chocolate, you don't. If you like apple juice, well, *I* don't…" Jack waggled his eyebrows.

How was it, he wondered, that Jack could just smooth down his ruffled fur like that? He'd never gone into that much detail with anyone else, and just the bare bones was enough to leave him snappish and surly for days. But Jack, telling Jack had been… simple. Not easy, exactly, but he'd shown the wounds and then Jack had eased them with a joke and a smile.

"I like apple juice just fine, Frostbite."

Chapter End Notes

As this will be the last chapter before Christmas - Merry Christmas if you celebrate it, Happy Holidays if it's something else - I'd list all the holidays but I honestly don't know what they are or how to spell half of them. At any rate, tis the season for goodwill towards men and peace on earth, so here's hoping you all get a bit of that this year.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jack slid out of bed, careful not to disturb Bunny. The Pooka wheezed a bit, snuffled, and rolled over to cuddle Jack's pillow, but otherwise remained insentient. Jack grinned at him, though his expression became slightly strained when the snoring resumed. It wasn't so bad when he was falling asleep, probably because when he was curled up against Bunny's back, the Pooka's snores were low, almost purring rumbles. When Bunny slept on his own, the pitch got higher and more annoying.

It was Christmas morning, and he had work to do.

Jack traded his nightgown for his workaday clothes, the brown knit pants and blue sweater that was quickly becoming his 'thing' among the children. He caught up his staff, and let himself out of the house.

There had been times, in the past month, that he'd wanted to sit North down and explain exactly how much work Jack had, compared to someone with an army of elves and yeti. Bunny got annoyed because North slighted Easter. Jack got annoyed because North made out like he had so much to do and so little time to do it in.

He headed outside, and called the wind with a quiet whistle. It was still dark out, several hours before dawn. Bunny probably wouldn't wake up until closer to noon, they'd stayed up later than usual. He’d been yawning when they'd gone to bed.

Jack, on the other hand… it was Christmas Eve, Christmas morning, not quite three days past the Winter Solstice. There was an itch under his skin, driving him up into the sky. His magic flared and spread out around him, extending his physical awareness several inches past his skin.

He read the pressure systems on instinct, tweaking here, nudging there, until the threatening storm spread out and began to drop large, fluffy flakes over the north-eastern coast. He drew in a few more clouds, until everything from Hudson's Bay to South Carolina was getting a fresh layer of Christmas Snow. Further west there was more than enough snow already; he poked a few cloud systems until they gave up the ghost and yielded, shredding apart so the morning sun would burn them away.

North America was fine, good, and South was in the grip of summer. Not his time, the itch whispered, and he moved east, to Europe and its bloody history.

Winter, his soul sang, blood quickening in his veins. Winter, when the nights were long and hunger nipped at empty bellies. Winter, when humans huddled together in their homes, around the fire. Winter, when grudges were nursed, when the snow kept people trapped. Winter, when the darkness grew stronger.

Everyone said winter spirits were some of the strongest, and nastiest, spirits around.

Everyone hadn't seen what winter spirits guarded against.

Jack's magic spread further, spinning out on the currents. Wind and cold and water and in it all were holes in the world. Holes where nasty things crept through.

Holes that needed to be filled.
Jack came back to himself hours later, exhausted and dripping with sweat. As per usual. *Sí an Bhrú* looked beautiful in the late morning light, everything dusted white with snow and ice. His senses were still spread out, into the frozen earth... and edging around the dark pool of energy deep below.

Digde sat down next to him, and offered a flask. The old Irishwoman looked as tired as he felt, and her wrinkles were deep enough to have been carved with a chisel.

"The shadows were strong, this year," she said. Jack tilted his head, too tired for confusion. She spoke in Irish - or something much, much older, distant parent of all the other Celtic languages - but he understood it in English. It didn't work for all spirits, just the winter-associated ones… and sometimes the ones that were associated with death.

"Might've been Pitch Black's work," he allowed, and accepted the flask. Good, clear spring water, tasting fresh from the earth. "Fear and darkness are intertwined together, in him."

The crone spat to one side, warding off evil. "We've enough troubles, we of *maith*, without *olc* walking around in a body his."

"Pitch hasn't figured out he'll have to pay the piper sooner or later." Jack passed her the flask, and tapped his crook against the stone retaining wall. They paused a moment to admire the frost patterns, curling spirals and branches here. Then, as if he hadn't paused, he continued. "But it might not be Pitch. Might just be humans."

Digde shook her head. "In the days when I claimed youth, they knew," she said. "You never saw such cruelty then as there is now."

"Humans lived differently then. And the *olc* was less subtle." Whatever the *olc* was. The Celtic spirits used that word - or similar - when talking about the holes in the world. And *maith* - and regional equivalent - were the spirits that fought the things coming through the holes. Jack had figured that much out. No one really talked about it. "Now… Well, now, influencing can do more damage than flat-out consuming."

"You seem happier," Digde said. Jack eyed her warily. Subject changes weren't changes, only tangents, with this one.

"I feel happier," he allowed. "Why?"

The crone sighed, and tapped the butt of her staff against the ground. He felt the ice sink a little deeper, as much of a ward against the dark energy below as anyone could manage. "I worried. I could see it, you know. Loneliness can weigh heavier than a mountain. And it leaves you vulnerable."

Ah. Jack cleared his throat. "I had friends. Have. I mean."

She nodded. "You did, and you do. But we don't see each other much, do we?" She sighed again, and stretched out her legs. "Summer has it easy," she added.

The *olc* was weakened by sunlight and warmth. The cold froze it in place, but didn't hurt the way summer light and heat did.

"Yeah," Jack agreed, and wrinkled his nose. "Well, you don't have to worry about me. I've got a roommate."

Digde grinned, her eyes vanishing in the wrinkles. "Have you now? And good for you. The likes of you are not for solitude. Not like the likes of me."
Jack nodded, and jumped down to the ground. "Speaking of roommates, I'd better get back. He'll be annoyed, now. I promised he could cook Christmas dinner."

"The White Christ was not born in winter," she spat. She paused, and added, "Mayhap he'd be less misinterpreted if he'd been winter-born truly."

"It makes a nice story, not that anyone pays attention to the important parts." Jack carefully didn't shudder at the thought of a winter-born Jesus. He'd been dangerous enough as a mostly-peaceful protester. That same rage against injustice, with winter's violence behind it? Erk.

Yeah, no, stories aside, he was glad that was one human born in spring.

"Hey, Old Mother?"

The old woman poked at him with her staff. He fended her off with his own. Winter spirit or not, getting iced over was annoying.

"Have you ever seen, uh, him… as a spirit? One of us? Considering how many people believe…"

She snorted, and rolled her eyes. "They believe he went to the havens. Not down here, working. You'll not see the likes of him until you're properly dead, boy. Don't borrow trouble."

"Wasn't. Just figured, you know, if he was among us… might be nice to invite him to Christmas dinner."

He left Digde chortling to herself over the idea, and flew west. At least he hadn't come to in the Middle East again, whatever the country name was. That had been even more exhausting than normal, with a side of sand in very strange places. He'd cleaned a frightening amount out of his ears for three weeks after that…

The Atlantic Ocean was wide and empty, and his flight wasn't the confused, fast one of that morning. Jack didn't bother trying to remember what had happened; it always happened, around every winter and summer solstice, when his magic took over and he… did what winter spirits did, the world over. He'd talked to Mother Nature about it, once, way back when he'd first met her. She'd said it was normal. And if she said that, then, well… it was.

Instead, he took the time to mentally chew over what the Cailleach had said, being worried about him. He knew why; he had been lonely, and loneliness could be dangerous. The rejection - real and imagined - hurt, and the pain made spirits either retreat or lash out. Jack… considering how angry he'd gotten, now and then, it was pretty obvious he'd lashed out.

Easter Sunday of '68… Bunny had said his withdrawal symptoms from the chocolate had contributed, but it wouldn't have mattered. Jack didn't much like thinking about how he'd felt, the entire decade, culminating in the storm. If Bunny had been the sweetest, kindest, most reasonable person ever, Jack… probably would have reacted worse than he'd done, actually.

He'd set off blizzards on Christmas Eve, furious with how Santa was cheered as a jolly, generous man, when he had his yeti run Jack off. He'd dumped snow in areas where people weren't used to it, locking entire counties in place. You couldn't drive in the snow when you didn't have snow tires, and you couldn't plow it away when you didn't have plows.

He'd always regretted his tempers after, of course, but he'd still had them. And the years where he'd had his worst tempers had been the years when he hadn't seen any other spirits. Digde was right; loneliness was not good for him.
Jack shook his head, and focused on the land he was now flying over. He couldn't change the past, so while it was good to evaluate his past actions, after a certain point he needed to accept what had happened and move on. This past year had been his best ever, with not a single bought of bad temper. That would only make him more effective against the olc.

He'd have to thank Bunny. And just to make things fun, he'd have to see about not explaining why.

~*~

Aster was not worried. Granted, the last time Jack had vanished on him, he'd come back half-dead and bloody, but that didn't mean every time he went out he'd get beaten up.

He hadn't even left a note.

The Pooka growled, and paced back and forth in front of the cabin. His anger at Jack's… inconsiderate vanishing act, yes, good, anger… was more than enough to keep him warm. He'd paced a path in the snow, down to the frozen earth. And at this rate, with how he dug his claws into the dirt, he'd soon get it down to bare rock at this rate!

… Because he was worried.

Aster huffed, and slumped back against the door. Jack could take care of himself, sure, but it was clear enough that he was no fist fighter. He fought storms, not people. And if someone jumped him, well… Jack had enough magical oomph to make people blink, but physically? He was a scrawny little slip of a thing, ninety pounds when wet, a few good tricks and really good instinct that wouldn't prevent him breaking his own fist.

He started pacing again, though slower. There was an idea. He could offer Jack lessons in fighting, train him proper. Thus far, the little bit of fighting he'd seen had been a mish-mash of styles and forms, obviously Jack using and perfecting scraps of what he'd seen over the years. Aster's training would be better, more focused. And it'd probably take years to get Jack to any kind of proper level, considering the sort of opponents he'd inevitably end up with as a Guardian of Childhood.

… Years of teaching, where Aster would be expected to stay here. Which wasn't the main goal, by far, but… years. Possibly decades.

He shook his head, and eyed the path through the garden. No, no scrawny little winter wisp - just the faint creak of gate hinges.

He dropped to all fours and bolted.

There wasn't enough room to build up his top speed, nowhere close, but he reached the fence in seconds. Jack jumped and almost fell at his appearance, catching himself only at the last second.

Aster looked him over, and didn't much like what he saw. Jack was always pale, but now he looked translucent. His hair and his sweater were plastered down with sweat, and his cheekbones stood out as if he'd dropped weight he couldn't afford to lose, overnight. He swayed like a leaf in the wind, and only his wide stance and his staff kept him upright.

"Climb on," he decided, and turned to present his back.

"Huh?"

He didn't sigh. "I'll give you a ride," he explained. "Hop on."
Jack blinked at him, and then staggered the two steps over to lean on Aster's shoulder. "Can't hop," he mumbled. "Thanks."

… Jack probably weighed less than ninety pounds when wet. He'd carried heavier Pooka kits before.

For once, the thought didn't hurt. Well, it hurt, but not the same way. It hurt knowing his friend weighed so little, though it was probably normal for someone who flew. But to his instincts, someone Jack's size weighing hardly anything… he had to focus on remembering that flying, because he just wanted to tuck Jack into bed and stuff him with good, toothsome food. Get him weighing something a little more reasonable.

Aster moved at a sedate pace back to the cabin, conscious of every minute shift of Jack's weight. The winter spirit wasn't quite drooling on his shoulder, but he was close to it.

What had happened?

Later. After a good meal, and maybe a nap. He'd made lunch; Jack had slaughtered a chicken that had stopped laying, and the bird had just been waiting to be turned into soup. He'd done a good one, in his opinion, with all sorts of dried veg added to the mix, a broth thickened with flour and the veg and chicken warring for space with small dumplings in place of the noodles they didn't have. The bones were simmering for a good chicken stock, and he had plans for that stock, oh yes…

He got Jack settled at the table, and served up two bowls of soup. Jack roused a bit at the scent, and began eating with a single-minded focus. Aster sipped, until he was sure Jack wouldn't drown in his bowl. He took bigger mouthfuls, savoring the soup; Jack ate quickly enough it was almost insulting, save for his exhaustion.

Jack was finished before Aster was. He shifted the bowl to one side, and then rested his head on the table. He might have been sleeping, he was so still, but he was breathing and he wasn't face down in any kind of liquid, so Aster let him be for the moment. There was plenty of soup left, and embarrassing as it was to eat so much, he was still hungry.

It took two and a half bowls of soup before he was full, and there weren't any leftovers when he'd finished. He washed up, and only after everything was tucked away - Jack was almost fanatically neat, after all - did he move to the winter sprite.

Jack stirred just as Aster reached for his shoulder. "I'm awake," he mumbled, shifting so he could peer up with one shadowed, blue eye. "Wish I weren't."

"You look right knackered," Aster said. "Want a nap?"

The winter spirit sat up. He looked better, at least. The food had done him good. "Bath," he said, and yawned. "All itchy."

"Alright. You want to sit here, or out by the fire?" He was already moving to fill the kettle with water and stir up the coals in the stove.

"Here," Jack said. He scrubbed at his eyes, and then blinked several times, as if that would wake him up. Maybe it would; humans were strange like that.

It took enough time to heat two kettles of water and pour it into the tub, before Jack tired of the quiet and started talking. Aster kept an ear on him, but Jack was slurring so much it was hard to parse out individual words, never mind which language. There was a word or two that might've been French, but the rest of it was probably English.
Maybe. The kind of English that resulted from exhaustion or copious amounts of alcohol.

It didn't take an unreasonable length of time to fill the tub with hot water. The kettle was large, and with the tub keeping the water hot, there was no urgency. Jack did have pots he could heat water in, but the pots were heavy. Besides, what was the point?

Once the tub was full, he picked Jack up and carried him into the small bathroom. Jack protested, even managing the odd word, and swatted at Aster's face. The blows, such as they were, came nowhere close, and Jack didn't open his eyes.

"C'mon, mate," he said, and eased Jack into a standing position. "Let's get you cleaned up, yeah?"

Jack cracked an eye open, and grunted. He cooperated as Aster pulled his clothes off. The sweater reeked; the trousers were caked with mud at the cuffs and wet with sweat at the waist. He set them aside for scrubbing later, and hurried out to grab Jack's nightgown. He hurried back, thoughts of a drowned winter spirit in mind, but he needn't have worried. Jack was awake and watching him, though he still looked rather drowsy.

"You don't have to watch me," he said, sounding much better. It was possible to understand each word and everything.

"Considering how tired you are, yeah, I do." Aster set the nightgown down, and sat next to the tub. "What happened, mate?"

Jack yawned, his molars visible. "Uh, work." He splashed water on his face. "Always around the solstice. Sometimes on. Sometimes before, sometimes after. Never know until I know."

He ducked under the surface and scrubbed at his hair. Aster did his best to sit on his impatience and refrain from demanding answers, but... he wanted to demand answers. What sort of work? And every year? What did - no, the solstice was a magically important time or something like that, so never mind what the solstice had to do with anything. If he thought about it for a minute, it'd probably be obvious.

Jack looked even more awake when he surfaced, five minutes later, and thirty seconds before Aster dragged him out by the hair.

"How do you hold your breath that long?" he demanded, momentarily sidetracked.

Jack side-eyed him. "Practice? Why, how long can you hold your breath?"

"Not that long." Ignoring the fact that, moment he started breathing water, his body would adjust. "What were you doing on the solstice?"

"Same thing everyone else was. Winter spirits, anyways." Jack shrugged, and held up one hand. He watched as the frost formed and melted almost all at the same time. "Woke up in... where's Sí an Bhrú anyways?"

Aster squinted at Jack. "What?"

"What, you don't speak Irish?"

Jack did? "Not the last time I checked."

"Huh." Jack grabbed the soap, and started washing. "It's Newgrange, in English. Since Sí an Bhrá is Irish, guess it's in Ireland."
"Newgrange, I've heard of. Since when have you spoken Irish?" he demanded.

"I can't. Well, I know a few names. Most everywhere I know 'cause the Irish Fae - the spirits - told me, and they speak Irish, so." Jack stood up, and began scrubbing down his torso. He looked steady enough, so Aster didn't let himself worry. "I can ask for a beer, though. Actually," he said, and pointed the soap at Aster, "I can ask for a beer in just about any language. I don't even drink beer."

"So why can you ask for one?" If he bit the soap, his mouth would taste bad. Not worth it. But if Jack didn't put that away…

"I have no idea. Thought I was saying hello, ended up with five beers and some very confused Kenyan spirits." Jack went back to rubbing the soap over his legs, and then sat down to rinse off. "I can speak to every winter spirit - whatever language they use translates to English in my head - but otherwise? Beer. I can ask for beer."

Aster chuckled, and held up a towel when Jack stepped out. Jack took it, and rubbed at his hair. "So what were you doing in Newgrange, again?"

Jack lifted his chin and did his best to look mysterious. Or at least, Aster assumed that was the intention; Jack actually just looked a bit silly, naked and dripping from his bath. "Winter spirit stuff," Jack said airily. He sobered, and shrugged one shoulder, drying off the other. "Actually, it's hard to explain. I know what I have to do, I just…"

Aster dodged an unintentional towel flick. "No, it's fine. Couldn't tell you how I muck about telling plants what season it is."

"Yeah," Jack agreed, and smiled. "A little like that."

Chapter End Notes

Fair warning, I haven't gone over this chapter with any kind of comb, actually, I was busy with family... stuff... So yeah, enjoy.
Chapter 12

Dinner that evening was some kind of curried rice, with enough spice Jack seriously considered the possibility that Bunny was trying to off him. If so, it probably wasn't a genuine attempt, and the food did taste good. Beside the rice and curry, there was plenty of yogurt and bread - necessary to cool the fire in his mouth - and a selection of juice and milk to drink.

Jack, once the dishes were washed and everything left over put away, pulled out a bottle of honey-wine and grinned.

"Want any?" he asked, and waggled the bottle in invitation. The liquid inside sloshed; it was just a little over half-full.

"That won't do anything for me," Bunny pointed out, but he got down two glasses.

Jack was careful, pouring out the wine. He hardly had glasses specific to liquor, in any form, and the large cups he normally used for milk and water, well… He could have fit a full half-bottle in one of them. A single finger of wine was probably four in another glass.

He toasted Bunny, and then sipped at the wine. Very sweet, he thought, and relaxed back in his chair. His exhaustion from earlier had eased, leaving him feeling tired but content. He'd certainly sleep well, and there wouldn't be any other really necessary duties until the spring equinox. Probably. And even that was hardly anything; these days he and Gou-Mang hung out in Anhui, China. Apparently there was a bath house or something there, for spirits. Jack had never gone, but maybe he'd check in with Gou-Mang and drag Bunny there some time.

For a dragon, Gou-Mang was not as much of a jerk as the others were. Sure, he had shades of 'holier than thou' and 'I know more than you do, nya!' but he also knew how to laugh…

"Deep thoughts?" Bunny asked. When Jack looked at him, the Pooka looked equally content with life, his glass of honey-wine cradled in both hands, his feet stretched out to toast in front of the fire.

"Don't know about deep," Jack allowed, after a moment. "Satisfied, though. Here to the equinox, I've got no major winter duties. I can spend my days herding clouds, sparking snowball fights, and annoying the yeti."

Bunny snickered. "Gonna end up on the naughty list," he warned.

"Never got off it. Even with the slate wiped clean." Though… did he really belong there? He wasn't a child, after all, not physically and not… huh. Maybe he'd been a mental child, those three centuries. Still, now that he had them back, was he still there?

He'd have to sneak in and find out.

"Mm. You were in Ireland this morning." Bunny sipped at his wine, and smirked. "Maybe you'll find this useful. Daidí na Nollag."

Jack yawned, and covered his mouth with one hand. "Okay, what's that mean?"

Bunny's voice was as dry as the Wildlife Sanctuary over in Saudi Arabia. "Daddy Christmas."
Good thing Jack hadn't been taking a drink. He choked anyways, but only on air. "Seriously?" The Irish called him Daddy Christmas?

Ooooh that gave him ideas… "Are you encouraging mischief and mayhem?" he asked, staring into the fire.

"You didn't hear it from me, mate." Bunny hummed tunelessly for a minute, apparently content to wait while Jack turned over a few budding plots to see which one had the best potential.

Jack set the plots aside to simmer, and finished off his wine. "So, don't you want to know what your Christmas present is?"

Bunny flinched, and stared at him. "I, uh… you're letting me stay here," he pointed out, with an odd twist of his lips. Yeah, okay, so Jack hadn't told him how to leave yet. They were going to set up the tunnel access tomorrow! If he had a calendar, he'd mark it down and everything. "And I eat at least twice as much as you do. Probably closer to three," he added, voice dropping. Jack probably wasn't meant to hear that… Oh well.

"Hey, you like it here, I like you being here, and that's completely disregarding the part where I got everyone a gift."

"North?" Bunny demanded.

Jack smiled, as gentle and serene as a frosted field. "Hey, he likes ice carving."

"Uh oh."

"Don't be like that. Besides, there's no Mrs. Claus. So there won't be anyone to spoil the surprise."

"Jack," Bunny said, eyes clenched shut. "What'd you do?"

Jack rolled his empty glass between his hands. "He likes Tooth, right? Like, flowers and candlelit dinners, violins, longing and mushy looks across a crowded room?" Bunny nodded, still braced for a blow. "I made him an ice carving of Tooth."

Bunny cracked one eye open. "That's it? With that build up, I was expecting -"

"And left it in his bed."

"… Something like that." Bunny sighed. "You realize he's gonna kill you, right?"

Jack looked innocent. "I have no idea why. It's a very nice carving. The elves helped me paint it. Looks very realistic."

"Dead," Bunny muttered, and downed the last of his wine. He poured more into his glass, and tossed that down the hatch as well. "So dead. So very, very - couple years, might calm down…"


Bunny stared at him… and then poured the last of the wine into his glass.

Jack laughed.

He ran through the gifts he'd gotten the others; Tooth, some hand-made, scented candles he'd traded cookies for, and her fairies a selection of Indian flowers, which he'd gotten with more cookies and a spice cake.
"They're not normally spirits I'd give gifts too," Jack had said, when Bunny looked dubious. "I had to get Makar - he's the patron spirit for Makar Sankranti, all versions, technically a winter spirit, long story - to translate. Nice guy. Gave him a fruitcake."

"Always figured those things were a declaration of war," Bunny grumbled. "Right, so, you traded Christmas cookies and cakes for gifts."

"Are you really surprised about that?"

He'd gotten Sandy a selection of liquors, running from eggnog to really fancy walnut... something or other. That hadn't been hard; thanks to his ability to ask for a beer in every language, he had a whole wall in his cellar taken up with bottles of alcoholic beverages.

"Sandy does like a good drink," Bunny mused. "Does him about as much good as this stuff does me," he added, lifting his glass of honey-wine. "I shoulda gotten him something."

"I asked, if you're interested. Where does he keep those fancy eggs you paint? The ones where you blow the yolks out?"

Bunny perked up. "He'd like a couple of those? I can whip up a good handful quick enough, once I've got the tunnel to the Warren. Could even bring a selection of paints back here, do it in comfort."

"I thought we'd set up access to your tunnels tomorrow," Jack said. He considered elaborating on what Sandy had 'said', but decided not to. Bunny seemed enthusiastic about making - he seemed to be up to a round dozen eggs, now - when Sandy had only asked for one. Whatever.

"Guess you have usual gifts for Tooth and North?"

Bunny shrugged. "North likes getting my shed fur, dunno why."

_**Shed fur?**_ Jack bit his tongue. Silence, in this case, was worth a little blood. "And Tooth?" he asked, once he'd gotten control over himself.

"Dyes, don't ask me what for. Simple enough stuff, and they're always happy with it," Bunny said, shoulders rounding forward.

Jack shrugged, deliberately relaxed. "Hey, it's my first year. Oh, I got Pitch a present too?"

"You... what?"

His smirk had fangs. "Well, I know where the entrance to his lair is. Easy enough to drop it in."

Bunny glared at him. "What'd you...?"

"Fireworks. Those little pop-crackers, lots of noise, not so much..." He waved his hand vaguely through the air. "Y'know? They were lit," he added, and waited for Bunny to put two and two together.

He saw the moment the Pooka got 'four', and grinned. If he'd been horrified at North's present, now Bunny looked this side of traumatized. "Forget the mad Russian. Pitch will kill you. Least you won't be a fearling, can't be a fearling if you're dead."

"Oh ye of little faith, I left Marzanna's name on the card."

Jack could feel Bunny's dubious stare, it was great. He snickered, and twiddled his thumbs, waiting.
"Alright, I'll bite," Bunny said, and sighed. "Who's Marzanna and why'd you do that?"

"She's…" Jack frowned. "Slavic. Or Polish. Or… well, you get the idea. Marzanna's her Polish name, let's go with that. She's a winter spirit there, they call her a demon, and she’s winter, death, and nightmares." He did his best to level a significant look on Bunny, who just looked confused.

"And?" the Pooka asked, head tilted to the side.

"Nightmares, Bun. C'mon, really? She's not had a date in ages. And if Pitch is Marzie's plaything, he's not going to bother us."

Bunny set his glass of wine aside, and rubbed his hands over his face. "Did you really," he asked, voice muffled by his palms, "trick Pitch into attacking a Slavic death-goddess just so he'd get laid?"

"When you put it like that," he mused, "It kinda sounds bad."

"Now I'm scared to ask what you got me."

Jack giggled. "Nothing bad, Bunny. And it's past time I expanded."

"You… what?" Bunny checked his drink, presumably the amount left. "What're you on?"

Silly. "I'm going to give you a room. I'd give you two, but I have plans for the second." He sobered, and did his best to show it in his expression. "I'm serious, you know, about wanting you to stay. Place is a little small for two people, but I've been meaning to put in more storage, I just never got around to it."

"But, Jack," Aster stammered. "Giving - giving me a room, my own - that's…"

Permanent, he wanted to say. It was different for North, who had more rooms than he had reasons for them. Anyone with three sitting rooms could spare space for assigned guest bedrooms. But for people like Tooth, where most of her room was taken up with storage for collected teeth, and Jack, who just didn't have much room anyways, a single room dedicated to a single purpose, or person, was…

It was a lot.

"I figure if you have your own room," Jack said, eyes soft in the firelight, "you'll stay. Or at least come back."

He looked away, and drank the last of his honey-wine. "I don't want to leave," he reminded Jack. "You don't need to give me a room to - to bribe me, or -"

"Not a bribe. Just… somewhere that'll be yours. For whatever you want."

Somewhere that was his. Aster shivered, as much revulsion as want. His own… but everything that was his, Pitch destroyed. Sooner or later. But this was Jack's place, so did it… count?

All of which was highly illogical, he realized. Superstition was all well and good, but not when it took the place of reason and good sense. This was Jack's house, he was merely offering to make Aster a dedicated guest room. Even if Pitch was deliberately seeking out Aster's homes and destroying them, which was accrediting the Nightmare King far too much by way of skill or sanity, there was no reason for him to know, suspect, or believe that Aster was now living with Jack.

… Oh. He was living with Jack.
He wheezed, and stared at the winter spirit in question. "I'm living with you!" he blurted out.

"Yeah," Jack agreed, sounding satisfied. "Everyone I've talked to thinks the roommate thing is a great idea."

Roommate, right. Good. Oh, that was much better than he'd first thought. Aster relaxed, and closed his eyes. "Well then," he said, "If you're really determined to make me a space, guess I might as well do the mannerly thing and accept."

"Only if you want to," Jack said, sounding amused.

"Just said I did, didn't I?" he snapped. "Right. Dunno about you, but I'm knackered. Going to be up long?"

Jack stood up and stretched. "Nah. If you get my nightgown out, I'll put the glasses in the kitchen. I can wash them tomorrow."

For once, Aster woke up before Jack did.

Thus far, he'd always slept past Jack's waking and cooking breakfast. He supposed he needed the sleep; until recently, his life had hardly been anything like restful. Certainly, he'd been falling asleep at the proper times.

Today, though he couldn't see it, he could feel the newness in the air. If it wasn't false dawn, it was only a little after it. He was wide awake, comfortable, and Jack was pressed up against his back, an arm over his waist and breathing stirring the fur on the back of Aster's neck. The winter spirit was ever so faintly snoring, a quiet wheeze of air going in, and whistle of air going out.

Aster hummed, and shifted the slightest bit. Jack whined at the scant movement, and crowded closer, until he was pressed up against the Pooka's back from head to knees. Thus settled, he relaxed and resumed his sleep-heavy breathing. Despite, or maybe because of the flannel, he radiated warmth like a banked fire.

It would be easy to go back to sleep, Aster mused. It was very restful, very comfortable, between Jack's warmth and the heavy blankets and the soft flannel nightgown. So why wasn't he asleep?

He eased out of bed, careful not to move too quickly and wake Jack. Poor Frostbite needed his sleep. He might've bounced back after a bit of a scrub and some food, but Aster remembered how Jack had stumbled back home. The only good side to things had been the lack of injury.

Aster moved through the sitting room to the door, and hesitated. He could always go back to bed. Curl up with Jack, just enjoy the feeling of being comfortable, not needing to go anywhere or do anything. When was the last time he'd just… done that? Never in recent memory, to be sure.

Yet instead of going back to bed, he opened the door and stepped out into the cold.

The sky overhead was completely clear, the stars the only natural light. The air was so pure and sweet it was hard to believe it, and the cold cut like crystal knives. Even the flannel nightgown wasn't enough to blunt the frozen touch; he might as well have been naked for all the good it did him. The discomfort was worth it, though, to look up and up and up, at the stars so clear and bright. The night sky showed the past, with how long it took for light to travel through space. Tens of hundreds of thousands of years back, the Pookan home world had been untouched, the star burning bright.
He wondered what Jack would say if he pointed at Sirius and told him he'd grown up there.

Aster gathered the loose fabric around, and drank in the view. Eridanus, the swath of space colonized during the Golden Age, was out of sight; southern hemisphere stars weren't visible up north, obviously. There had been a wormhole, between Sirius and Eridanus that the Pooka had used. There hadn't been anything in their nearby galaxy, and wormhole travel was safer than the long route.

Despite that, not being in the same area as Eridanus - El-Ahrairah only knew how far the two places had been apart, wormhole aside - the fearlings had still…

He looked away, and swallowed. Over in the east, the sky was just beginning to brighten.

The gate creaked, breaking the silence, and then he heard the crunch of someone walking across the snow. Just as they came close enough for him to identify, North took a deep breath and began to sing.

"O Holy night," he sang, his voice resonating across Jack's domain. "The stars are brightly shining. It is the night, of our dear saviour's birth."

He smiled at Bunny during the brief pause, eyes gleaming with some emotion, good humour and Aster didn't know what else.

"Long lay the world, in sin and e'er pining." The song was meant for higher pitched voices, but North made it work, dropping down where the song normally went high. "'Til he appeared, and the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks, a new and glorious morn!"

North trailed off, humming, and then burst into song again. He seemed to like that final line, because he sang it twice more, his voice rich with an emotion that clutched Aster's heart and squeezed.

North finally sobered, and forged across the snow again. "You are awake early," he said. With the quiet, he didn't even have to raise his voice to be heard.

"Just slept myself out, I suppose." Aster opened the door. "Want in?"

"Thank you, my friend. It will be nice to get the load off."

Aster busied himself in building the fire back up from the coals, and then getting cups for tea prepared. North had hung his coat up and sat down by the time he was finished, and looked comfortable enough.

"So what brings you by?" He offered milk and honey for the tea. North passed over the milk, and added three large spoonfuls of honey to the drink.

North slurped his tea, and sighed. "Jack is vicious prankster."

Aster hid his smile with the teacup. "Is he? He hasn't done anything to me since I started bunking here."

"You are his favourite." North put his tea down, and pulled a flask out of his pocket. He added a large dollop of amber coloured liquid, and his tea gained a distinctly vodka scent. "Of course he would not make your heart stop in surprise."

Aster hummed in reply, and blatantly changed the subject. "What was that song you were singing?
And why?"

"Subtle," North muttered. "Only not. It is called 'O holy night', is Christmas song. Tell me Bunny, why did you not take Christmas?"

He fumbled his tea cup. "What?"

North looked serious enough. "Why did you not take Christmas? Season of hope, and so close to beginning of New Year. Mind you, I am happy with it, would not enjoy delivering eggs, but sometimes I must wonder why?"

"Season of greed, more like," Aster grumbled. He set his cup aside, and considered the flames. North deserved an honest answer. Even if it was a stupid question.

"It's not just that I don't like the cold," he said, testing each word before saying it aloud. "Even though I do. I'm a creature of spring, North. Maybe if Christmas was a spring holiday, we'd have come to a blue or two, but it's not, mostly. Christianity is a child'a the northern hemisphere. Maybe it spread, but still."

"The festival of lights did not start Christian," North countered, though without heat. "But yes… the shortest day of the year has more impact on long, cold nights."

"A pretty welcome thing in summer," Aster agreed. "Besides. New Year used to be first day of spring, when you knew summer was coming again, and everything was waking up. Christmas is false dawn; Easter's the real thing, starting the new day."

North snorted. "If you are doing that as comparison, then Christmas is midnight. There is more time between Christmas and end of winter than there used to be."

"Moving away from the ice age. Be thankful, a year 'round freeze suited no one but winter spirits." Aster picked his teacup up again, and turned it around. "North, the main reason I never challenged you for Christmas is I like Easter. Back then it was… different, sure, nudging the stubborn plants into the season, and these days painting the eggs and hiding them, but…"

He shook his head. "Could you see me delivering prezzies or something? Or - Christmas Hare, I don't even want to know what could've come from that. And how about you waking the world up to spring, what'd you do there? Find some poor winter spirit and kill 'em, get the blood going?" Aster tilted his head towards the bedroom. "There's one spirit that'd be nervous about that, if that were the case."

"You have a good point," North agreed. "Several of them."

"What brought it on, anyways?"

North sighed, and shook his head. "Oh, it is… Do you remember the great wars? Christmas during war." He sighed. "So depressing, yet there is that aspect of hope. Even more than wonder. Things are getting so dark, these days."

Terrorism and bombing, military drones in the sky and too many orphaned kiddies. Sometimes he missed the older days, when he could steal away children and set them up in safety. That'd been back when he'd still worn his clothes, of course. Now, of course, he couldn't do that. Well. He could, it just… was unwise. There weren't too many places these days where he could set up a little commune of kids and teenagers and they'd be left alone. And kids marked by magic… sure, he'd get them away from the bombs, but there were worse things, and those things looked for magic-touched mortals.
It was one of the reasons why he kept a close eye on Jack's first believers.

But that didn't help when visiting a war-torn area of the world. North, whose heart broke with every drop of innocent blood, had it worse. Aster, at least, was... not used, you could never be used to something this horrible, not and keep your soul, but... well. He'd seen a great many wars.

Sometimes it was tempting to find a nasty, soul-sucking spirit and let it loose on those vicious, hateful idiots who thought hurting children was the way to wage a war.

"This too will pass, North," he murmured. "All you can do, all any of us can do, is remind these people that there's more than hate and cruelty. That there's light, and life, and things to take you away from the nastiness, if only for a short while."

"It wears upon me," North replied. "Sometimes I wish... oh, it is a terrible thing, but sometimes I wish I were not Santa. As human, I could fight evils with my swords, be seen by all. If I were human..."

"If you were human, you'd be long dead," Aster countered. Best to shut that line of thought off, and quickly. "Ded Moroz would be Santa, or something." Not that there was anything wrong with the old guy, but half the myths about him portrayed him as a demon of winter, not just a wizard. Santa Claus could go anywhere, even into the desert, all around the world in a single night. Ded Moroz couldn't.

For that matter, even the regional variations on Santa - the Christmas Witch, what have you - didn't have that 'go anywhere, all the world in a single night' support that Santa Claus had. Which was all well and good for them, but not necessarily for the kids. Santa gives presents to everyone, as long as they put their stockings out. The regional present givers only gave their believers gifts, and there were fewer and fewer of those every year.

"We fight the fight where we can," Aster said, when the silence had stretched on too long. "Do our best to break that cycle of violence. It's no different than giving a wife-beater's kid something nice, because maybe, just maybe, kindness from us will teach him better than his Da."

"War and actions in war are hardly..."

"Violence is violence," Jack said, and closed the bedroom door behind him. He yawned, and scrubbed sleep from one eye. "People will learn. Stick with what you can do. Y'know," he added, and shuffled towards the kitchen. "After World War... one? Two? Either way, there was a Superman radio show. Can't remember who it was, exactly, but he had some reason for infiltrating the KKK somewhere in the US. Anyways, he played Superman on the radio. Went on air as Superman, eight shows or something where Superman called 'em immature brats dressing up to try and be impressive, looking like idiots, uncool and unhip... Membership dropped, and enrollment tanked."

North scowled in thought. "What does that have to do with bombings in Middle East?"

"Santa says it's uncool. Don't underestimate the influence a so-called fantasy figure has. I'll talk to Pippa," he added, vanishing through the archway. "She does art and stuff. Maybe she can be our publisher or something."

"It would be nice to feel like I am doing, not observing," North agreed. "Thank you. Now, Jack."

"Yeah?"

"About your gift to me..."
Aster prudently lifted his feet out of the way, and stayed put. North could chase Jack around and around all he wanted - at least, until Jack took a window to escape - but he was going to sit, enjoy the fire, and drink his tea.

Chapter End Notes

So this is after Christmas, but we're moving towards Easter and as of next chapter, so are the Guardians. It's (finally) snowed up here in Canada, Ontario and it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas... several days after. Jack never has that problem, in his domain...
"So have you ever done this before?" Bunny asked.

Jack stopped mid-twist, back aching. He'd have to make the windows bigger, come spring, because he'd only barely gotten through. And only by swiveling his hips in a way more appropriate for a stripper pole. "Um. This… this what?"

Bunny looked away, his expression what some other person would consider 'haughty'. Jack knew he was embarrassed; the twist of his mouth and the way his ears were angled told him so. "I mean, letting another domain access yours."

"Summerland," Jack pointed out. Though, that was one thing, gates were meant to open and close. Bunny's tunnels were meant to be traveled through. That Easter he'd become a Guardian, Pitch had been able to attack the tunnels, at least from the scraps the others had let slip over the years. He'd have to figure something out, maybe a trap or two… or ten… or… well…

Depended on whether Bunny noticed traps on his tunnels, Jack supposed. And whether he could figure out the logistics of trapping every tunnel, when half of them only seemed to exist when Bunny willed it.

It'd have to be a project for later, he decided. Right now, he'd have enough time making the tunnel-access work, without getting fancy.

"It's not hard," he decided. Creating the gate to Summerland had been pretty easy, anyways. "It'll probably be boring to watch."

"You'll need me to open the tunnel."

"Can you open one to the other side of the yard?" Jack asked. "It'll be easier if I can get a feel for your magic."

Bunny frowned at him. "Maybe? I've never tried opening one anywhere but the Workshop… but that's not a… a domain, exactly."

Jack cracked his neck. "So how does North keep from being found?"

"Technology bolstered by magic, but it's very much in the real world."

Made sense, he supposed. Domains were supposed to take lots of magic to create, more magic the bigger a domain got. North's domain would be a huge thing. Jack's wasn't, so he'd gotten away with it fifty years into his time as a spirit.

Fifty years, he thought, suddenly feeling old. Fifty years had seemed an eternity back then, but now… Well, he supposed that was what happened when you got older. Everything that you'd already been through got compressed, so that a decade seemed to be no more eventful than a single year.

He crouched down where Bunny's tunnel would open, and looked up. "Well," he said, and gestured to the ground. "Give it a try."
Bunny scowled at the snow. "In that?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Would you prefer mud? C'mon, Bunny, hurry up."

The Pooka grumbled a bit, but moved to stand just inches from Jack's fingertips. He kicked some of the snow away, and scratched his toes against the frozen earth. He hummed, and tapped his foot against the ground twice, firmly enough Jack fancied he could hear the quiet thumps.

Nothing happened.

Well, no, that wasn't quite right. Jack had felt something, kind of like when he visited Mother Nature's domain. There was a sense of power pressing against him - this time a bit like noon sunlight on his face, instead of pressure against every inch of skin - and he'd felt his magic reach forward and press back.

Bunny looked stunned, to the point his eyes were very nearly round instead of just big. "Hrk."

"Eloquent," Jack muttered. Okay, so Bunny's magic had done that, and Jack's magic had responded like so…

"Try again," he said, after staring at the exposed ground for a minute. And, you know, making a few tiny changes to the boundary to his domain in this spot.

"Er, Jack…"

He looked up, and raised his eyebrows. "What?"

Bunny looked away, the bridge of his nose pink through the fur. "Never mind." He tapped his foot, and Jack felt the magic again, though less on his body and more… Huh. He could actually feel the border of his domain here, at least while Bunny's magic was pressing against it. Neat.

Jack made a few more tweaks, and had Bunny try again. Now all Bunny's magic was directed at the border, which was almost a shame. It'd felt nice, really. Like basking in the sun, or pressing his face to freshly washed sheets and breathing deep.

It only took a little more work before Bunny was able to open up a tunnel. He dropped into it, and Jack reached for the fast-vanished white tail without even thinking about it. He caught himself, and grabbed handfuls of snow. The tunnel didn't close, so he held still and waited.

Bunny popped his head back up, grinning. "Apples, mate. Goes right to the main tunnel for North America. If you can make that opening permanent-like, I can make the tunnel stick. Won't have to open it every time I come and go."

"I thought you were opening one across the yard." Jack bent his neck to the work, though. Right now the changes were temporary, like shifting aside threads in a weave without breaking them. Now he had to carefully stick each 'thread' in place. It wasn't exactly like making a hole in his domain border, as a… kind of… archway.

With that, everything seemed to snap into place. Jack relaxed, aware of his tension only now that it was gone, and sat back on his heels.

"Well, now you can make it permanent," he said. "But you might want to wait until the gazebo's up, so you don't get snow everywhere."

Bunny hopped out, and muttered something under his breath. Jack took it as agreement, and plucked
the hardy snowdrop that sprouted from the closed tunnel. He twirled it between his fingers, and grinned.

"So when do you need to start your Easter prep?" he asked, tucking the snowdrop behind one ear.

"It won't be until April," Bunny said, his expression vacant. Probably getting a feel for his deadline; Jack couldn't figure what else it could be. Bunny focused quickly enough, and wrinkled his nose in amusement at the flower behind Jack's ear. "I'll have four months - well, more like three and a half, Easter falls midway through April. I can take my time with the harder stuff. The googies won't need planted until midway through February if I want them to sprout at the right time."

Jack nodded, and made encouraging sounds while Bunny thought his way through Easter prep aloud. It all sounded like more work than Jack was used to; about as easy, or hard, depending on how you looked at it, but in less time and needing more planning. Jack was used to getting a - a call to go to trouble spots, which could be everything from a hurricane to negotiating between different winter factions. It wasn't exactly something one could plan for, and he'd spent plenty of winters doing nothing much.

Bunny, quite obviously, worked differently. He worked every year, without fail, and at what sounded like very long hours, too.

"If you need any help," Jack offered. Bunny blinked at him, expression mostly blank except for his raised eyebrows. "Hey, I can dig in the dirt, too."

Bunny snorted, and nudged their shoulders together. "I saw your vegetables, mate. No, no you really, really can't."

Jack clutched his chest and pretended to stagger. "Betrayal," he gasped. "Bunny, how could you? I worked really hard on those plants!"

"And well-meaning as it was, your work was absolute shite," the Pooka said, absolutely ruthless. "Stick to what you're good at, mate. I'll make sure your garden knows what season it is."

"Well, fine then. Fine. Catch me wrist deep in icky dirt, then," Jack huffed, grinning. "But no, I can help carry stuff, bring you food, whatever. I want to help. Really."

Bunny coughed, and rubbed at the bridge of his muzzle. "Ah, maybe after I've got everything started," he said, stammering only a little. His ears kept twitching back and forth, and his muzzle looked a bit sunburned under the fur. That wasn't a blush, Jack realized, that was full-on tomato red, the sort of colour that only came with the strongest of embarrassment, or the deepest of rage.

Oooh, what had sparked that reaction? Jack very carefully didn't grab Bunny and demand an answer. He'd just have to steal another snow globe from North, sneak in.

Not that snow globes were very sneaky, Jack admitted to himself, but if Bunny were distracted…

Aster had spent most of his week in the Warren, preparing the fields, and… not quite hating every second of it, but not enjoying the work.

It was unusual. And worrying. He'd never resented being in the Warren before. Even - even when the longing for his own people, the hurt from all the empty burrows, when the sorrow and loneliness twined together to make a vicious knot in his stomach… Even then, there had been something comfortable about being deep under the earth, thick moss underfoot and old species of ferns brushing his shoulders as he moved through the tunnels.
It was warm in the Warren, but not the right warmth. There was light, but not the right kind. The air smelt of flowers, too many species to count or name, but it was overpowering instead of pleasant. Everything was quiet, too quiet, and he kept straining his ears for sounds that… weren't there, were foreign to the Warren and to Australia.

Aster was reluctant to go to the Warren every morning, and delighted to leave every night. The unsettled and faintly worrying disgruntlement faded the moment he entered Jack's domain, still in the grip of winter. The crisp air might have been cold, but it smelt of pine and frozen water, wood smoke and a hint of ozone. And if the outside was cold, inside Jack's home it was warm, with a fire crackling in the fireplace, good food on the table, and a comfortable bed to snuggle into for the night. Birdsong was audible from outside the domain, and there was always the faint rustle of wind through the tree boughs. It was comfortable, and welcoming, and above all worrying.

He shouldn't have felt so comfortable in someone else's domain, and so ill at ease in his own.

He'd have to talk to Jack, Aster decided. Explain how he'd need to spend more time at the Warren - he wasn't leaving, just taking a leave of absence. That was all. Couple of months on his own, he'd be able to focus entirely on Easter, and not the hollow feeling in his chest.

Good arguments, all of them. Now if only they worked.

Aster sprang out of the tunnel, and shook the faint dusting of snow off his fur. The air somehow felt colder, almost damp, and he bolted for the cabin door as fast as he could in the limited space. Fast as he went, Jack had the door open for him before he'd reached it, somehow knowing - he always knew - that Aster had arrived.

Only time Jack hadn't met him at the door, he'd been out. And back, within the hour of Aster's return, hale and healthy and not exhausted, but still. Aster had worried.

"Hey Fluffy. I made shepherd's pie tonight."

His mouth watered at the thought, and the smells. His resolve to stay in the Warren until Easter was over faltered. On the one hand, Easter. On the other, pie.

"Smells good," he said, and discreetly checked for drool.

Jack grinned, and preceded him into the kitchen. Aster had the feeling that Jack was making meals with more meat than usual. Very indulgent, was Jack, catering to Aster's cravings. There were plenty of wild plants that could be eaten raw, and they were even tasty - at least, to a Pooka - that way. But raw meat? Even if he'd become so uncivilized as to consider it, the taste and texture was… no.

He had no idea how humans could eat raw fish, even if it was preserved. No. Just… ew, no.

So he hadn't had meat, properly cooked and spiced, in a long time.

Aster set the table while Jack got the pie out of the oven, the whole thing smelling heavily. Mutton and potatoes, carrots, peas, onions, a hint of thyme, and other things he had difficulty recognizing. The pie steamed, great wafts of it rising to the ceiling when Jack cut into it, lifting away two large wedges.

Aster poured them each two glasses, one of sweetly chilled water and one of their preferred juices; mixed fruit for Jack, and apple cider for Aster.
"Looks good, mate," he said, eyeing his wedge of pie. Oh, it looked so much better than merely good. All discontent with his work in the Warren faded away at the first bite of mutton and potatoes.

Jack chuckled, but kept quiet while they ate. He sat back in his chair when Aster went back for a second wedge of pie. He ate it a little slower than the first one, but with no less enjoyment.

"Y'know," he said, licking the fork clean. He must have been doing a little better, he didn't go back and finish the pie. There was enough for two modest wedges, and he just knew it'd show up as breakfast in the morning. Best way to start a day.

Jack made an amused sound when he didn't continue, and poked Aster's knee with his toes. "What?" he asked.

Right, talking. "Your cooking skills. If you'd been a Pooka, you'd have been snapped up." And dead, now, but no sense thinking about that. Though the thought of Jack as a Pooka was an odd one. His appearance was fair enough as a human, but he'd like as not look strange with fur and long ears.

Still, with cooking skills like this, his appearance wouldn't have mattered very much.

Not that appearance mattered overmuch for shapeshifters, but one's natural, base form was always more comfortable than any other shape, no matter how aesthetically pleasing.

Of course, the moment he shared that observation, Jack about fell out of his chair laughing.

Aster glared at him, ears pinned back. "What?"

"Sorry, sorry," Jack gasped, wheezing. He pulled himself upright with a white-knuckled grip on the table edge. "Just, way you phrased that - Oh god I can't breathe."

… Idiot.

Aster cleared the table while Jack got control over himself, and started the wash. Jack recovered in time to quickly dry, and put the leftovers away in the cold room - currently the frozen room - to keep overnight.

"C'mon," Jack said. He moved to the oven and picked up the kettle. Two mugs were already prepped for tea; he poured in the water and then set the kettle to one side. "Grab a mug."

Aster grunted, and picked the one closest to him. They moved into the sitting room, and settled into a chair at the same time. "So?" he asked, and sipped at the tea. "What made you laugh so much you almost carked it?"

"Mental image," Jack said, and smirked. "Fur and long ears, Bunny? Sudden image of myself in lingerie and those Playboy bunny ears, getting stuffed in a sack a la North, carted off to cook until the end of my days."

"Mental image," Jack said, and smirked. "Fur and long ears, Bunny? Sudden image of myself in lingerie and those Playboy bunny ears, getting stuffed in a sack a la North, carted off to cook until the end of my days."

Aster sipped his tea, the better to cover his silence, and then set his mug down. "You're insane."

He ignored the winter spirit's sniggering, and stared into the fire. Dinner had been a lovely distraction, but now he had to broach the subject. There was no question of it, after all; Easter was important. He had to bring his best efforts to his holiday, and this disquiet - no.

If only he could figure out what the problem was. He was sure he'd be able to work properly, if only he knew why he felt so… wrong.
"It's lonely," he realized, and blinked. Had he said that aloud?

Jack set his mug down, and reached over for Aster's knee. "What is?" he asked, staring up through his bangs.

"Ah, well." Aster cleared his throat. He had said that aloud. "Working in the Warren. I'm... not used to it anymore."

"Being lonely isn't something you should be used to," Jack said. He squeezed Aster's knee and let go, sitting back in his chair. "Besides, didn't I say I'd help, however I could? Want me to come hang out? I can bring a couple books, read them aloud?"

That...

... was actually quite appealing. He thought about it, about planting the googies while Jack plowed through The Hobbit, and The Lord of the Rings. It'd be a bit awkward when it was time for the googies to start sprouting, but that never took long. Two, three days of concentrated work, and then Jack could keep him company some more, while he watered and weeded and encouraged. And Jack had seemed to enjoy the painting process, the last time he'd been in the Warren.

"I'd like that," he admitted. "It's just too quiet in there."

Jack cracked his toes, the sound fit to put Aster's fur on end, and sighed. "Thought of a radio?"

"Now and then. Never really seriously, never seemed much point."

Jack nodded, and picked up the Hobbit from the end table. "Right, so, where were we," he said, thumbing through the book.

They read, or Jack read and Aster listened, until they were both ready to turn in. Aster stretched, and eased down, only to see Jack staring at him. He stared back, one eyebrow quirked in silent question.

"You look better," Jack said, and smiled. "I don't think you'd be able to use any of my belts anymore."

"Your," he spluttered. "I've never -!"

"When you first arrived." Jack turned and headed for the bedroom. Aster hurried after; he had to protest this - this - gross lie! There was no way he'd be able to use Jack's belt.

Jack was just too scrawny. And flattering himself.

Jack pulled his belt off, and held it up. "Here," he said. "Let's compare. Gimme yours."

Aster rolled his eyes, but took his belt off. He handed it over, and folded his arms across his chest, feeling the lack of his bandolier all of a sudden.

His belt, he was pleased to note, was a third again as long as Jack's, if showing its age a bit more. Hardly comfortable, loaded down with everything he kept on his bandolier, but good enough if all he needed was a single knife sheathe and one for his boomerangs.

"Right then," Jack said, and brandished Aster's belt. "What have you been keeping it at, tightest
hole?"

… Might have been, but he didn't have to admit it.

And then Jack, the bugger, demonstrated where the leather was worn from the buckle, the mark a clear indication of how tight Aster had been wearing his belt. He'd only just started wearing it past Christmas, but he'd still considered adding another hole. Now it was tighter, pressing into his stomach if he bent or twisted, but only a month on.

Jack held up his own belt in comparison. "This is the hole I normally have it on," he said, tapping one that was three in from the end. When he held the two belts by the buckle, the holes were within hairs of each other.

Jack looked unimpressed. "Please tell me you have to let it out a notch," he said. "Because you were skinnier when you first showed up."

"Oh, rack off," Aster spat. He slid past Jack and got his nightgown out of the wardrobe. "What's it even matter to you?"

Jack put the belts on the dresser. "Pretty sure someone a foot taller than I am, with shoulders almost twice as broad as mine, shouldn't have a waist narrower than mine."

"Pooka."

"Okay, even greyhounds are better proportioned than you are, Bunny!"

"Oy! No dogs in the bedroom!"

Jack snickered, and tossed his sweater at Aster's head. "I'm glad you're gaining weight," he said. "At least one of us should. Even if you could still use one of my belts."

"You only have one belt," Aster protested. He tweaked his sleeves, and then crawled into bed.

Jack followed shortly after, and pressed up against his back. "Two, technically," he said, before yawning. "Ugh. The other one's broken. Dunno why I'm keeping it."

"Reduce, reuse, recycle," Aster murmured, before tumbling into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

And Bunny's incarceration is now at an end, he can come and go as he pleases. Apparently he does not please and would rather stay curled up by the fire or in Jack's bed, where it's warm and comfortable...

Eh, he's old and recovering from the whole wilderness-survival thing. He deserves as much of a vacation as he can get.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Warning for brief mentions of a corpse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jack wasn't going to say, but he loved Easter Prep. Granted, the one and only time he'd tried putting hands to earth, Bunny had chased him with malice aforethought, but otherwise it was incredibly enjoyable. The Overlands had been a long string of farmers, from all branches of the family; he might have switched to shepherding thanks to Cousin Aldo (after World War Two, using the name Adolf had always seemed a little, well, awkward, even about people who'd died long before that particular one had even been born) but it wasn't like he'd become a scribe or anything.

Never mind that Father Carter had ensured Jack, like the rest of the village children, could not only read but write well enough to shame the soft-handed townies. He hadn't made a living scribbling down other people's words, which was the important thing.

At any rate, Jack had always been drawn to watching farmers at their craft, occasionally inspired to tweak the weather, the better to bring rain before it was due, or send it on its way when it'd overstayed its welcome. There wasn't much he could do that way, but the little he could, well… Now that he had his memories back, he could recall every single time (well…) one of his father's family had grumbled over the weather, and how it wasn't cooperating.

Watching Bunny plant the green, egg-shaped bulbs, hundreds of thousands of them, in curves and arcs as orderly as any plowed field, wasn't quite the same. For one thing, Jack wasn't allowed anywhere near the planted bulbs unless he was bringing Bunny something to drink. For another, he spent the entire day lounging on a rock or an egg golem, reading or talking.

After the first day, he'd started poking around the non-field part of the Warren, staying within shouting distance - the Warren was huge - but otherwise going where his curiosity took him. He'd uncovered a few… Wall carvings, mosaics, some cross between the two… and mindful of what Mother Nature had told him, he didn't ask Bunny about the scenes there. Or why all the Pooka - he assumed they were Pooka, the long ears kind of implied it - were colored in, well, psychedelic hues. And wore clothes in even more psychedelic hues.

Bunny was a gray-blue shade, mostly, but the Pooka in the wall images were red and gold, lots of shades of green, and a bright, periwinkle blue he'd only seen before in a couple flowers. Maybe it was an art style similar to the ancient Egyptians, who'd depicted women as being yellow and men as being blue… or maybe that was the other way around. Either way, no one had been skin coloured, unless you had jaundice.

Mostly, he kept Bunny company and read through the assorted works of Tolkien. About midday, he always nagged until the Pooka joined him for a picnic lunch. He stayed, until Bunny decided he was done for the night, and then they packed up and went back home.

It was comfortable and almost homey, and those times Jack tired of reading and they talked instead were pleasant. It was only ever about easy subjects, like preferred music and the insanity that was obsession with celebrities.
Bunny was a little less current than Jack, in the twentieth century instead of the twenty-first, but it hadn't been the twenty-first century for very long, so that wasn't even a hitch in the conversational stride.

They talked about fashion - or Bunny ranted and snarled and Jack listened and laughed - and architecture. Bunny preferred the Oriental styles; Beijing's dramatic reds, the patterns made from wood and empty space, the carvings everywhere; traditional Mongolian yurts more than the sturdy buildings, though Bunny loved the painted and tiled walls and roofs; Taiwan's towers and the solid brick in the older buildings. Shinto shrines and Buddhas laughing and solemn, long bodied dragons and, despite his dislike of everything canine, Foo dogs guarding temples. "They look more like lions than dogs," had been his excuse.

Of course, Bunny also loved any architectural style that involved partly or entirely burying one's dwelling place. He'd gotten almost giddy enthusing over the Inuit sod house, and he and Jack had spent an entire afternoon debating over whether the prairie sod houses of the eighteen hundreds had been inspired by the Inuit or Vikings. Or, as Jack had eventually pointed out, Natives more local to the prairies than the Inuit had been.

Jack had never enjoyed lounging around doing nothing but read or watch someone else work more.

So of course his duties had to ruin everything.

Jack tumbled off the golem with a curse, landing on his elbow. He swore louder and with much more feeling then, curling around the aching limb.

"Jack?" Bunny left his planting and bounded over, reaching Jack's side in three large hops. "You right there, mate?"

"Funny bones aren't funny," he groaned, and straightened his arm. "Fine. I just… have to go. Out."
At least it didn't feel like another hurricane, or even a large blizzard. Though, from what he could feel, there was every possibility he'd be cleaning up after an avalanche or something.

"Go?" Bunny asked, his hands hovering over Jack's shoulders, but not touching. "Go where?"

"There's a - a thing," he said, gesturing vaguely. "I have to go." Where was his staff?

There. He caught it up with his foot, spinning it upright between his toes and into his hand. "I need to go south." Yes. The feeling drew him south.

"We're in Australia, mate," Bunny said, sounding far away. Jack ignored him, walking to the permanent tunnels. "Not much south of us but - Jack, what're you talking about?"

"I have to go," he said. The feeling was getting stronger. "I have to go south."

The permanent tunnels were all opposite of his need. Jack kept turning to go over there, but then the call strengthened and he turned back towards the south, away from the tunnels. He was aware, vaguely, of frost coating his footprints, but everything was narrowing on the call.

He had to go.

Someone was talking, voice loud and shrill. Didn't matter.

Had to go.

He had to.
He -
He had to go.
He had to go faster.
The wind rose behind him. Flung him forward.
He heard someone shout. A tiny part of him wanted to turn, assure the shouter, but he was driven forwards.
The tunnel was straight and clear. He flew faster. South. He had to go south.
There was sky ahead. He rocketed up into the air, snow falling from his shoulders. South. Forward. South and left. Then down.
He staggered, and fell to his knees beside the -
Oh. Shit.
The Jotun stared up at him, his one remaining eye glazing over in death. His lips trembled, pain or an attempt to talk, Jack couldn't tell.
He took the Jotun's hand, though it was easily big enough to wrap around his torso. "I'm here," he said. His duty had brought him here, to the dying Jotun. Something important to winter, he supposed. "Tell me."
"Betrayal?" Jack asked. The Jotun's fingers twitched, and then the gurgling noise stopped. Jack held the Jotun's hand until the eye clouded over. When he let go, the body crumbled into dirty, blood-stained snow. It was almost a relief.
"Jack?" Bunny called, cresting an iced over ridge behind him. "Jack!"
Jack blinked, and shook his head. "Bunny?" He flew over, to spare the Pooka the run, and directed the wind to blunt the worst of the cold. "What - where are we?"
Bunny looked at him like he was crazy. "Antarctica. You suddenly ran off, babbling about having to go south."
Right, right, he vaguely remembered something like that. "You should go back into the Warren." Betrayal. The Jotun - had the Jotun betrayed someone? Or been betrayed? "I'm going to have to look into this. I don't know how long I'll be. It could be almost anything."
"What happened?" Bunny demanded. He caught Jack's arms at the elbow, and hung on tight. "And what do you mean, look into this?"
"It's part of my duty. Herding storms, snow days, I negotiated territorial boundaries between Snegurochka once - but you should get back. You have lots of planting still, right?"
Bunny's ears fell back. "Will you be okay?"
Jack looked back at the mound of dirty snow. "I should be," he said, slowly. "Not going to promise anything, but - well, there's no reason why I wouldn't."

The Pooka hesitated, and then nodded. "Alright, I'll get back to it. But stay safe, Jack."

He nodded, and watched until Bunny vanished into a rabbit hole. Then he went back to the former body, and dug through it until he found two things.

One was a rock, something like a disk, painted blue and white and carved on both sides. It had been strung on a leather thong long enough Jack could have used it for a belt, the thong going through a wire loop. Jotun didn't bore holes in their name-stones, and the solutions were as varied as the individuals. This one had wrapped wire around his name-stone, and the wire seemed to be part of the design.

The other object was also a rock, but as similar to the name-stone as penguins were to bald eagles. The name-stone resembled Paleolithic carvings; simple and powerful, but stone carved with stone tools. This object...

Jack blew out his breath like he was trying to cool soup. The blue opal was pretty enough on his own, but the magic imbued in it made it glow like one of those chemical lights that'd been popular back in the nineteen-nineties. The magic burned with cold against Jack's hand, and winter spirit or not, he had to wonder if frostbite was something he should worry about.

"Betrayal, huh?" he asked, and stood up. "No kidding."

Aster perked up at the sound of the door opening, and quick-walked to the archway. Jack looked over at him, smiled - or grimaced, rather - and leaned his staff up against the wall. He closed the door, and, moving very deliberately, walked over to the wall next to the archway.

And then he banged his forehead off the wall. After the third 'thud', Aster reached over and put his hand between Jack and the wood.

"So, it's only been a few hours. Can't have been that complicated," he said.

Jack groaned, and pressed into the contact. "Define complicated. So many tears."

Tears?

Later, he decided. "I made a fry up. C'mon, you'll do better with some food in your stomach. You missed lunch."

"Did you?" Jack sighed when Aster pulled away, but followed him into the kitchen. He sat when Aster pointed at the table, and examined the meal with near professional interest. "When you said fry up, I was thinking American south."

"Is it less of a fry up if it's rice?"

"Technically it's a stir fry, but it looks good." Jack spooned up a helping of broccoli and rice, and chewed. "It's good," he decided. "Did you make the soy sauce from scratch? And from what?"

"I didn't, I swung by North's and filched some ingredients." Aster frowned at his own spoon, and then shrugged. Wasn't like Jack had chopsticks, and the food didn't taste any better or worse with the 'wrong' utensils. "Now don't change the subject. What happened?"
Jack toyed with his water glass, and then shrugged. "One of my duties. Y'know how I vanished on you with the hurricane? That's pretty much what happens. One minute, everything's normal, the next, I have to go… wherever. The longer I resist, the stronger it gets, and the stronger it is the next time it happens.

"Back in the early days, I'd resisted a lot. By the time I figured out what was what, well… There's no magical reset button." Jack smiled, and ate more stir fry. "Anyways, I don't know what makes this storm more important that that one, or why I have to show up to deal with these spirits but not those."

"And this time?" Aster prompted. "What - who was that giant?"

"That was a Jotun," Jack said.

A Jotun? Aster shook his head; size aside, brutal injuries ignored, that'd been a human. Essentially. Jotuns had been feral monsters, wiped out by the Asgardians, who'd then faded away from lack of belief. Jotuns had blue and white skin, no hair, and didn't even bother with loincloths.

Of course, the moment he explained all that to Jack, the bugger had to go and laugh so hard his hair got dipped in soy sauce. Aster found him a napkin to sop it up, but it left Jack with a wet, brown fringe.

"You goof," Jack said. Aster bristled, despite the fond tone. "Jotuns dressed up to go to war. In their day to day, they looked just like the common Norse. Okay, bigger, but still. Hruk was Jotun, believe me."

… Fine. Admittedly, Aster'd had limited interactions with the Aesir, and less with Jotuns. It was entirely possible that he'd been wrong. Paint would explain how Jotuns could be as patchy as a paint horse.

"How'd you find out his name?"

Jack shrugged. "Went to his village. Headwoman recognized his name-stone - that's why they'd paint up for war. Had to show their names in battle."

Aster shook his head, but didn't argue. "What'd happened, then?"

Jack sighed, and went back to toying with his water glass. "So. Hruk and his wife Oilna, and their kids… Dunno their names… had made friends with an ice drake. Not the usual, for Jotuns; they're very insular. They don't even like dealing with Jotuns from other villages. But Hruk and Oilna and Savishka all got along. Savishka even watched the kids, which, wow. Colour me surprised."

By which that was a highly uncommon occurrence, Aster supposed. "But Hruk died."

"Yeah." Jack paused to eat a few bites of stir fry, and then continued. "Hruk beat out another Jotun, Brok, for Oilna's hand. Brok stole from Savishka's hoard, and did everything he could to make it look like Hruk and Oilna stole the stuff. Hruk caught him at it, and they fought. Hruk lost."

Aster nodded. Names aside, he was keeping up well enough. "What'd Brok steal?"

Jack cleared his throat. "Uh, some of it, it'd probably be very rude to tell. Ice drakes are very protective, and they like magical artifacts. She wasn't too happy about me and the headwoman knowing. Hruk had recovered an ice opal, and that was the least of it, so…?"

"I… I have no idea what an ice opal even is," Aster said, suddenly feeling lost.
"It's… You know blue opals? They look almost black, except then the light glitters off them and it's like… like fire, frozen in place, and blue?" Aster nodded. "Yeah, so take one of those and then pour a lot of ice magic into it. Drop a small one into the Atlantic Ocean, the entire thing would flash-freeze. Very magic, very cold."

"… And that was the least of it?"

Jack grimaced. "Yeah. Savishka seemed the responsible sort, though, Brok's theft aside. Anyways, so I showed up in the village with this ice opal and Hruk's name-stone, and everyone started shouting louder. Headwoman and I eventually sorted things out. Savishka got her stuff back. Hruk's dead, no changing that, but Savishka is going to help Oilna and the kids out."

"And Brok? I assume he was punished."

Jack studied a bite of chicken, and hummed. "Brok was given to Oilna. The corpse was dumped into a glacial ravine, when she'd finished. I mean, it'd just turn to snow, but symbolism, you know?"

Aster shook his head. "Why were you needed?" he asked.

"I could yell the loudest," Jack said dryly, and then focused on his food.

They finished eating and, after cleaning up, retired to the sitting room. Instead of picking up the book, Jack rummaged on the mantle for one of his craft baskets. Knitting, Aster saw, and very carefully didn't sigh. He didn't miss his pipe often, but there'd be something right about smoking a bit of 'baccy at the moment.

A chair that rocked would've been nice, too.

Jack smirked at that observation. "I'll get on it with the thaw," he promised. "Won't be long now."

"What do you do, when you're not on duty?"

Jack looked up from his knitting. "I'm always on duty, Bunny. Winter just moves to the southern hemisphere. I get a bit of a break during the transitional months, but that's it. South-winter is calmer than north-winter," he allowed. "But I've been called out in June and July."

Aster nodded, and settled into the chair. "I should learn how to knit," he decided. "Something to do."

"Maybe carving. Unless…” Jack held his knitting out. "Give that a feel and see if the needles are comfortable."

"I can handle chopsticks, I think I can handle knitting needles." Still, he did give it a try, positioning his hands the way he'd seen Jack holding the needles. It felt… odd, decidedly, but after a few seconds, the knuckles on his first finger began to ache. He handed the knitting back, and shook his head.

"Old breaks." He rubbed his hands together. "But what's this about carving?"

"Wood carving," Jack said. "I even have some wood blocks and a good knife." He pointed to one of the baskets. "Help yourself."

"Maybe I will."

Jack went back to his knitting, and was quiet for a few minutes. Aster stared into the fire, feeling strangely content. He was warm and comfortable, full of good food, and satisfied with what he'd
done for the day. He'd sleep in a bed tonight, with Jack curled up against his back. In the morning, he'd eat a good breakfast, and head back to the Warren for more planting. Jack would be there, talking and reading and poking about, they'd have lunch…

It was good, but so different from how his Easter work had gone last year that he boggled. Last year, he'd slept in his fields, tense and fretful, too wary to really rest. He'd eaten when he remembered, and half the time he hadn't. The food he'd had, well, raw vegetables was putting it kindly. Just because a Pooka could eat tree leaves and live off it, didn't mean it tasted good. He'd spent his days alone, apart from his egg golems. And once Easter was over, he'd gone right back to living out in the wild.

And tending to the shrines. He hadn't, once he'd arrived at Jack's, but… Well. They'd understand, wouldn't they? He hadn't been in any way capable; he'd have gone out to tend the shrine, and then refused to return, out of pride or shame, or both.

Now he knew better. He'd finish up Easter, come back here, go out to tend the shrines… and always return.

He glanced over at Jack, knitting away, his bangs still brown from the soy sauce. Maybe he'd take Jack, when he recreated his parents' shrine. They'd always worried about his lack of friends. It'd be late, but it'd be nice to reassure them that he wasn't still alone.

"So why don't you sing more?" Jack asked. He remained up high against the cliff wall, on a shelf of rock barely wide enough to be worthy of the name. Bunny prowled down below, a hundred feet separating the winter spirit and the enraged Pooka.

It did not feel like enough.

"Because it's private!" Bunny spat, fur bristling up and down his spine. He looked twice his usual size, and his ankles and elbows looked odd. Jack, despite his curiosity, wasn't going down there to look. Oh no. He was a smart winter spirit, he liked all his limbs attached and his blood in his veins.

"But it was pretty!" Wait, no, not pretty. Pretty was not the word that came to mind when listening to Bunny sing.

The music had been… something else. Ethereal. Bunny's voice had been low, rumbling at the deepest notes, then rising up and trilling more sweetly than any songbird. The language, if there had been one, wasn't something Jack could even begin to figure out; there'd been clicks and pops like in some African languages, there'd been what might have been entire words, there'd been rapid-fire, glottal sounds, as fast as machine-gun fire but much, so much nicer to listen to.

It'd been alien and beautiful and he'd stood there like an idiot, listening, eyes closed and focused on nothing but the music.

Which was how he'd gotten caught, of course.

So, now, he was up as high as he could get, relying on Bunny's fear of heights to keep himself safe. He doubted it would last very long; Bunny looked really angry and really determined.

"Pretty!" he roared, and leaped. He hit the wall fifty feet up, and climbed another twelve, before he made a mistake and looked down. Seconds later he dropped to the ground, and went back to pacing. "Pretty! Jack, get down here!"

"No," he whined. "I like it up here!" The rest of the Warren was carved and painted, but up here it was more like a rough, unfinished cave than anywhere else. Water slicked the walls, but only in
spots and lines, kind of like a really tiny, mostly vertical set of streams and ponds. Lichen ruled instead of moss, though whatever method Bunny used for lighting ensured that ferns and flowering… ferny… things… grew wherever there was a pocket of soil.

Besides. If he went down there, Bunny would… probably not hurt him. Just throw him out. Likely into an active volcano.

"Really, Bunny," he called. "It was amazing. I'm sorry I surprised you, but I'm not sorry I heard it."

Bunny roared again, and leaped. He didn't make it quite as high as his previous attempt, but he climbed further before freaking out about the height and jumping down. Jack cringed, and did his best to pull his feet up without losing his balance.

"Frostbite!" Bunny roared.

"This isn't getting the eggs sprouted, you know!"

Bunny roared again, and made it seventy-five feet up the wall this time.

Jack shut up.

It could have been minutes, it could have been hours, before Bunny called over several egg golems and went back to his work. Jack's spot was a perfect acoustic location; he was able to hear the singing just about perfectly. He closed his eyes again, listening, letting the music do its thing.

Which was, of course, why he fell off the ledge.

Jack shrieked and flailed, knocking his fingers once against his staff and too many times to count against the wall. His staff fell, but not within reach, and - ow.

A hundred feet was not far enough to get it together and fly. Especially when he didn't have his staff.

He gasped for the breath that had been knocked out of him. At least the ground was soft. Soft grass, soft moss, soft earth underneath. Still. That'd been a blow. Having his staff off to the side had been a mistake. Closing his eyes had been a mistake. Swaying to the music had been a really, incredibly dumb mistake.

Jack started to roll over, and bone dragged against bone. He screamed.

"Fucking ow," he told Bunny, and huffed at the horrified expression. "I'm fine. Arm's broken."

Bunny whined, and helped him sit up. "Jack, I'm fine and arm's broken are highly contradictory and I should think it's highly inappropriate to put those two sentences together. You are not fine!"

Jack huffed again, and tilted his head sideways just enough to brush his forehead against Bunny's shoulder. "Fine. It's just a break. Not even bad. I just. Splint, for a few days."

"Why didn't you fly?" Bunny asked, helping Jack shift his arm so he could hold it against his chest. "You fly. I've seen you. Lots."

He snickered, which - surprise, surprise - hurt, and relaxed into Bunny's cuddling. Oh wait no, Bunny was picking him up.

Eh, cuddles either way. Mobile cuddles. And ah, yes, the shock was hitting.

"Didn't have my staff. Tried to grab it," Jack said, panting a little. Endorphins were a wonderful
thing, but also his arm really hurt really badly. Talking was hard. "Didn't. Um, can't really fly. Without my staff. Wow, broken arms suck."

"Not supposed to be a garden of daisies, mate." Bunny put him down, and ignored Jack's sad eyes at the loss of cuddles. "I'll be back with a med kit, so just sit tight. Don't move. Strewth," Bunny muttered, and rolled his eyes.

Jack grinned, and started examining the egg fields. Yesterday evening there'd been patches of turned over dirt as far as the eye could see, each little dirt-mound surrounded by lush grass. Now a full third of the dirt-mounds were showing pale green sprouts just peeking up out of the earth, like a mint-hued fuzz.

His grin faded when his arm started throbbing in time with his heartbeat. Several of Bunny's large golems clustered around him, their carved faces looking worried. Or angry. Hard to tell. Especially not when his arm felt hot and swollen.

"Here," Bunny said. Jack cracked one eye open; Bunny had the weirdest of medical kits in hand that Jack had ever seen. It looked like a basket of multi-coloured eggs. Several of the eggs were wrapped with bandages. It was distracting enough that the pain seemed to subside, just a bit.

"Gonna have to take your sweater off," Bunny said, after a moment. "Here, just sit tight, I'll do the work for you."

"You know," Jack said, breathing deeply. "Normally I need a bit more of a - fuck, fuck, ah Du Hurensohn!"

"Language," Bunny muttered, easing Jack's broken arm through the sleeve.

"Fahr zur holle! Petit tabernac zur Holle mit dir!"

Bunny dropped the sweater to one side, and peered at Jack's arm, nose less than an inch away from the skin. "How'd you land on it?" he asked, and poked at a forming bruise.

"While flailing," Jack said, and hissed at another poke. "Really?"

"So you don't know how you landed on it." Bunny turned and rummaged through the basket, and pulled out one of the bandaged wrapped eggs, a second, dark blue egg, and two straight sticks.

"Bone doesn't seem out of place, so we can splint and wrap it. Should be apples."

"Is this going to hurt?" Jack whined. "Because it's hurt enough, thanks."

The Pooka scowled at him, and unscrewed - huh. The egg was not an actual egg, just an egg shaped container. The top third came off, and it was filled most of the way with a dark, oily looking liquid.

"Drink that, it'll kill the pain."

Jack sighed, and tossed the liquid back. Thankfully, there wasn't a lot of it, as it was disturbingly herbal, thick and bitter. He was able to get it all down in one swallow, though he dropped the container and gagged immediately after.

"I thought broken bones were bad," he moaned.

Bunny snapped his teeth at Jack, and then just stared at him. Jack stared back, vaguely annoyed at the intensity of the glare, though as the pain lessened, so did his annoyance. The pain-killer was
working - and with the pain gone, he was left with a loopy, floating feeling.

Kind of like getting drunk, he supposed, except completely lucid. No brain to mouth filter, but no helpful forgetting the morning after, either.

He giggled.

Bunny looked a little disturbed, but went back to poking Jack's arm. Jack helped hold the sticks into place - heh, sticks - and hummed while Bunny wrapped his arm with bandages. The bandages stuck to each other, but they didn't feel sticky. Just weird. Kind of like crinkled tissue paper.

"You should sing more," he decided, and whined when Bunny draped a sling around his neck. "No, I hate these."

"It's good for you," Bunny said, and helped Jack ease his arm into the sling.

"They itch. Like…" Jack hummed, and tilted his head to the side. The rest of him began to tilt too, but Bunny grabbed him. Bunny was a good friend. "Turkeys," he decided, and nodded.

"Itch… like turkeys?" Bunny asked, which made no sense.

"Are you drunk?"

The Pooka snickered, and helped Jack sit back against a boulder. A comfy, squishy boulder covered in moss. The moss squished when he poked it. Like a carpet.

"I think you should take a nap. A full egg might be a bit much for you, it's a bit strong…" Bunny picked up the container, which looked like an egg, and looked ruefully into the empty part. Jack made a grabby hand at the egg, and Bunny screwed the lid back on and then handed it back.

"I'm not a lightweight," he protested. "I drink. Like. Lots. When I dun wanna." The egg was blue. Jack went to tuck it in his pocket, but his sweater was off. So he balanced it on his belly button instead. Innie, not an outie. Heh.

"You drink when you don't want to?" Bunny asked. He picked up Jack's sweater and draped it over him. "Why would you do that?"

"Because Thor," Jack said darkly.

Bunny paused, and then nodded. "Fair enough. Right then. You just kip right here, Frostbite. I'll take you home when I'm done for the day. Maybe you'll be sober by then."

"Nope!" he chirped. And then, after a pause, "Are you gonna sing again?"

Bunny glared at him. "That's private."

Jack pouted. "But I liked it. It was like - like - all the voices of the mountain. And the wind. And spring. Please?"

"Did you just quote that Disney malarkey at me?" Bunny sighed, and rolled his eyes. "Get some sleep, Jack. I've got my egg plants to work on."

Jack whined, but closed his eyes. He didn't sleep though; drunk sleep was the worst sleep, and ended with stolen hats and pigs confused at the human in their midst. Drugged sleep was probably just as bad. Fortunately he had experience in just drowsing, and even drugged, he did no more than drift along in a floaty, comfortable haze.
And Bunny maybe started singing again when he thought Jack was asleep.

It was so nice. Jack wished he could purr, like a fluffy little cat. A white cat. With fluff. And a sparkly blue collar. Because then he could purr. Instead, all he could do was hum, but quietly, so Bunny didn't hear and stop singing.

Bunny stopped singing, about the time Jack could feel the fuzzy, cotton-swaddling around his brain ease up a little. It didn't go away, but he was able to hold a thought for more than a few seconds.

The lack of singing probably helped with that. Jack sighed, and did his best to fix, in his memory, the need to encourage more singing from Bunny. He'd heard professional bards, spirits that had become spirits just because they'd been *that good* - although Elvis had become a spirit too, so - and Bunny was loads better.

He blinked an eye open, and smiled at the sight of Bunny sorting through the basket of eggs. Sure, it was a med-kit, but coloured eggs.

And it reminded him.

"You know what?" he asked, and then watched as Bunny went from sitting to five feet in the air. His jaw dropped. Bunny landed on all fours, braced and ready, fur puffed up so he looked twice his normal size.

"Uh," Jack said.

Bunny turned and looked at him. "Frostbite! What the hell!"

"I. Just. Thought?" Wow. Bunny looked very puffy like that. And kind of cranky. "You did Christmas."

Bunny's ears flattened down against his head. "Yes. I did," he growled.

Jack sat up, and scowled at his broken arm. Then he looked up and beamed. "North should do Easter!"

Bunny paused, and then his ears began to lift. "Tell me more, Frostbite. Uh," he added, looking concerned. "When you're sober."

Chapter End Notes

All swearing was obtained off the internet, so dubious coherence.
Tooth caressed the carved box, fingers tracing the lines dug into the top. "It's always so sad," she said to her attendant fairies, who bobbed mid-air in agreement.

The others never really thought about it, but there were thousands upon millions of children in the world, and billions of adults. And that was only in the present day; she had been at her work, guarding and hoarding, for a millennia.

Bunny, she thought, might understand. But then, the eggs he gave out were in his Warren and under his watch for such a short time. North with his presents was much the same, and while he made or oversaw the making of each gift, once it was under the tree - or in a shoe, a stocking, at the foot of the bed, or otherwise waiting for a child - he ceased to think of them. Sandy and Jack both worked with such ephemeral things, dreams and snow, and she doubted they thought of it.

She had a big castle, all spires and open windows as a flying creature preferred, with room upon huge room. They all knew that. But did any of them stop to think what she kept in those rooms, what she did with all that space? Store teeth, obviously, and yet…

She doubted it conveyed the proper sense of scale.

Or what happened when, inevitably, she ran out of room.

She was always running out of room.

Such was the nature of life and living, the circle all beings traveled. One day, she too would travel that final path, and step through to… whatever came after. She wasn't sure, anymore, what she expected. She had died once, already, to become a spirit… although she wasn't sure about that, either. Had she died? Or had she just come to the brink of death, one foot over the line, and then been brought back?

Tooth shivered, and set the box down with the rest. Child-bright smiles beamed up at her from the painted images, each one forever young, forever innocent.

Each box full, the teeth beginning to crumble away.

This group had been soldiers, mostly, in the various conflicts and wars of the twentieth century. Vietnamese soldier rested beside American, Congo and Egyptian and Russian all together. A few women, but mostly men. A few boys, but not many; boys who went to war often came back boys yet, never to get any older.

There were some teeth she wished she could keep forever, as if in hoarding them and caring for them, she could make up for the short, violent lives the humans had lived through. There were some she was happy to pass on to the ether, fingers itching at memories of thoughts, small, hateful lives spent being a misery to others. And there were some, like the soldiers, that made her feel conflicted. So many of them had seen hellish things, levels of violence to make a professional torturer vomit, so many of them had been broken by those things. But so many of them had spent their time hating their enemies, former enemies, thinking the worst things about them.

Tooth sighed, and moved back to a safe distance. She could only do what she'd always done, and
put her faith in the beliefs of her childhood. Whether the name was Agni, Rama, Vishnu or Varuna… Whether it was the Christian's God or something much, much older than the pantheon of her people… she had to trust that these memories would go to a greater power's safe-keeping.

Because she was out of room.

The wooden altar was waist high, if she stood on the ground. The boxes of teeth, with deep carvings and faded paint, formed a pile on top, stack upon stack of boxes, easily as tall as the length of her arm. The whole thing threatened to be taller than she was.

The sweet scent of oil hung in the air, permitting the bare courtyard like an entirely unsubtle perfume. Tooth and her girls clustered near the archway, one of the few areas in the courtyard where the paving stones weren't permanently blackened.

She had never been strong in her father's gift of fire, devoted though she'd been to Agni. She had enough of the gift, just, to light a spark in the pyre, with a breath of prayer and a flick of her fingers.

The oil did what she alone could not; the wood caught and burst almost at once into flame. The flames seemed to roar as they consumed the dry wood, and dryer shards of bone. The heat, sudden and intense, was like a blow, just barely blunted by her coat of feathers. She turned her face away, but didn't flinch.

She had done this too often, over too many years, to flinch.

Her fairies stayed with her, though she could feel how much worse the heat was for them, with their smaller bodies, and their youth. They were very brave to stand firm, though, and she made sure to project her approval and sympathy with all her strength.

Another fairy approached, this one older and… not the same as her sisters. Baby Tooth. Tooth could never, would never resent how a name took her girl and changed her, less her twin-clone and more sister-daughter. She would be forever grateful to Jack, for this opportunity. After all, the longer Baby Tooth held her own identity, her own name, the further away she pulled from Tooth. And the more of an individual Baby Tooth became.

It was a delight, like watching an infant gain personality as it grew. Tooth's fairies had always been a reflection of her own self, but there were times when Baby Tooth disagreed. Always, thus far, about the little things, but it was still so exciting.

And there was no better distraction for what she had done than spending time with her first child.

Baby Tooth flew through the archway with an apologetic twitter, and an overgrown, rather furry shadow.

"Bunny," Tooth said, eyebrows climbing halfway up her forehead in surprise. "Whatever are you doing here?"

Bunny grinned at her, though his grin faltered at the sight of the pyre. "Hiding from North. Frostbite's fault. What's this?"

"Oh." Tooth's girls drooped, the sorrow she couldn't fully show. "Well. Eggs aren't the only ones with expiry dates. Mine just… come later…"

The fire was already dying down, the tooth boxes and teeth within all turned to ash. The fuel gone, the oil spent and the wood consumed, there were only a few flickers of fire now. The courtyard was bare for a reason. It would be safe enough to leave, and the ashes were best left to the weather. It
would be soon enough, a few years perhaps, that she would need to make use of the courtyard again. There was little sense in scouring it clean, when the spirits belonging to the teeth had long since moved on, and when the courtyard would get dirty again so soon.

She took a deep breath, and smiled up at Bunny. "Perhaps you would join me for tea?"

He offered her his arm. "I'd be delighted."

Bunny glanced back at the courtyard one last time, solemn and worried.

Tooth did not.

Tea, properly done, required something of a ceremony. Not quite to the level the Japanese took things, she supposed, but still. A proper order, the right way to heat water - at this altitude, something a little more complicated than most people had to deal with - and then heating the pot so it didn't crack with the first drop of hot water. Polite discussion about the weather while the tea steeped, and then pouring at a natural pause during the conversation. Sugar, lemon, and then the first savouring sips.

"So," Tooth said, and leveled a stare at Bunny over the edge of her cup. "Why would you need to hide from North?"

Bunny smiled, ducking his head sheepishly. Tooth sighed; Bunny's teeth were so lovely and white, with strong enamel and such a unique shape. But they'd had this talk a long time ago, and delightful as he looked when flustered, Bunny wasn't the one she was interested in.

"Well," Bunny said, and sipped his tea. "Frostbite strong armed me into Christmas, if you remember."

"I remember," she said, wings buzzing quickly with delight. Jack had denied their relationship, trying to pass it off as friendship, but she had working eyes. Bunny relaxed, his eyes going soft when he was near Jack, and Jack orbited Bunny as though the Pooka were a gravitational well and Jack a passing satellite.

It was so romantic.

And all that aside, they were good for each other. Bunny could dwell on things, while Jack was rather flighty. Less than originally expected, but he could still rival Mercury for how he flit from subject to subject and emotion to emotion. Bunny needed someone to take care of him, and Jack needed someone to take care of.

Their similarities and differences made them like the yin and yang of Daoist philosophy. Yin needed Yang, and Bunny needed Jack.

If she were honest, she was a little jealous.

"Well - Jack's a menace, you know?" Bunny chuckled, such a low, rich sound, like the chocolate he prepared for the children every Easter. "He pointed out that since I celebrated Christmas, it was only fair North celebrated Easter."

"Oh, Bunny," she breathed, a grin stretching her lips. "You didn't!"

"I was only thinking ten googs or so," Bunny protested. He looked down into his cup, eyes crinkling at the corners with a smile he didn't quite show. "Then Jack showed up with another five hundred."
"Jack did, hm?" she prodded with a smile.

Bunny rolled his eyes, looking all sorts of exasperated and fond. Oh, that was even better than she'd thought. Jack was obvious in his attraction, but Bunny could sometimes be hard to read. She knew he liked Jack, even loved him as a friend and boon companion, but there was a difference between loving a friend and loving a lover.

She was so happy for them.

And so jealous. Of Bunny, particularly.

Humans had a hard enough time, when there were age differences between lovers. Spirits had it worse. When you had watched empires rise and fall, it was rather difficult to understand and relate to spirits who… hadn't. Just as it was difficult for them to understand and relate to you. Bunny was lucky, in Jack. Young he might have been, but he still, somehow, understood.

And Bunny was the oldest spirit she knew, Sandy aside.


"So you're hiding from North," she said, staring up at the frescos on the ceiling. She sipped, deliberately nonchalant, at her tea. "Was it the chocolate?"

"No," Bunny groaned, and slumped in his seat. "I - it was the elves," he said, weakly. "Once they realized there was chocy going walkabout, they lost whatever 'roos they had left. There, uh, was a slight fire."

Tooth was at once torn between hilarity and horror. "Bunny! The elves mustn't have sugar! They - fire? Oh no!"

"Just a little one!" Bunny made a sound that might, uncharitably, be called a giggle. "And it weren't nowhere important."

"But North's upset," Tooth said, and shook her head. Of course he would be upset, the silly bear of a man. Bunny had spared the three of them the worst of his vicious temper, so North obviously thought that his teasing was taken in the same friendly, good humoured spirit it was offered. Tooth had tried to explain otherwise, in the beginning, but she hadn't known how to talk to North then. And she hadn't known how to read Bunny, to see the dismay and resignation and know it for those emotions. By the time she could, she couldn't begin to think how to bring it up again with North.

And then, for Bunny to do this, after they had spent more time together in a single year than they had in the three decades before…

North wouldn't see it as an equal response to his own teasing. Even if it had only been the ten eggs Bunny had planned for initially. No, North would be bewildered and hurt and rather upset by the chaos, able to see only the surface of things and not what lied beneath.

She would have to soothe him. Once she'd calmed him, she could explain, and perhaps now she would finally be able to get through to him.

"North threatened to skin Jack," Bunny said. Tooth blinked, and covered her surprise by refilling her tea cup. "The snowballs probably didn't help," Bunny added, every inch of him looking completely rueful. His voice told a different story, though; he sounded as cheered about the snowballs as he looked rueful. It was probably some combination of both, honestly, and she couldn't quite blame him.
After all, as long as no one had gotten hurt - and it sounded the case - then it had been a lovely prank.

"I'll be sure to keep North from catching Jack," she promised.

"Ah, no, Jackie's got his own way of ducking trouble," Bunny protested, everything shifting to fondness. Did he know, how obvious he was? He might as well have written a message in the sky, probably something along the lines of 'Jack Frost completes me!' for everyone to see. "I just figured North wouldn't be likely to look for me here."

"Considering how often you complain about the heights, I would not be surprised." Tooth reached over and wrapped her fingers around Bunny's wrist. "Did you have fun?"

"I," Bunny said, and ducked his head. The bridge of his nose looked sun-burnt, under his fur, and then she realized it was a blush. "Yeah," he admitted.

Tooth shook her head and giggled. Oh, whatever would she have done without these silly boys of hers?

"I'm glad. You could use more fun in your life." And Jack, Guardian of Fun, was just the one to bring it. "So, other than driving North to distraction… Tell me something new you're doing," she demanded.

Bunny looked up, and tilted his head. "How about the wood carving?" he asked, and grinned when she nodded. "Well, I'm starting simple, I've never done it before, and Frostbite's a surprisingly good teacher for all he can't finish a carving on his own…"

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Tooth has mild fire-starting powers. Emphasis on "mild". It's one reason why she'd be a summer spirit, if she were a seasonal, but it's only really good for lighting candles or sparking an oil-soaked stack of wood. And yes, she's burning the tooth boxes; teeth do rot, after a while, and even huge storage spaces like she's got have limits. When someone's a few decades dead, well... They aren't going to mind.

Also, sorry for the short chapter, but next one's a doozy and there's no way to split that up into two... and I know people don't complain about reading long chapters, but this author complains about editing them, so.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jack felt an immediate and instinctive fear when he entered Mother Nature's domain and found, not the pristine wilderness he'd expected, but a city downtown straight out of... huh. Manhattan, Dubai, Chicago, Ottawa, and Cairo, among others. The architecture seemed to constantly shift, just when he wasn't looking at it. The languages on the signs blurred between English and... not English. What did he know, he spoke other languages, he didn't read them.

He swallowed, and lifted up into the air. The wind curled around the edges of buildings, but seemed as uneasy as Jack was. It really didn't help that, changing architecture aside, the place was completely still. There weren't even far off sounds, like he was used to, hinting at animals just out of sight. There were no plants, no scraps of trash. Just concrete, and asphalt, and glass.

Jack flew along the streets, and then - when it started to look like he might have somehow gone in a circle, despite going straight - up until his height rivaled the highest sky scrapers.

The downtown stretched out as far as he could see. It was, he thought with a sudden shiver, a bit like he imagined a planet-wide city might look. As for the streets and buildings... if there was a pattern in the layout, he couldn't see it. It just looked like a grid, the streets forming lines and the buildings forming the squares.

He flew slowly over the city-scape, completely unable to tell if he was going anywhere or not. The buildings were mathematically random, going in a pattern of one huge sky scraper, followed by three high (but still shorter) sky scrapers, two tall high rise buildings, and one large, squat building that could have been administrative, a library, a car park... he couldn't tell from looking at the roof. Then the order reversed to the huge sky scraper, at which point it repeated. The huge scrapers were all a mile apart, and offset in a pattern that Jack was still puzzling out when he finally found evidence that he was moving - and where he was to go.

The castle rose above the surrounding city-scape, sized so the huge sky scrapers seemed no bigger than a child's dollhouse. As Jack got nearer, and able to see details, he was... interested... to note that the smallest stones in the castle wall were all bigger than he was tall.

"This... is still Mother Nature's domain, right?" he asked. The wind whistled around a sky scraper's lightning rod, and carried him faster to the castle.

Abruptly, with a sudden wrench of perspective, the city-scape shrank, or Jack grew. Suddenly the buildings were small enough he could have crushed them with his foot; the tallest of the sky scrapers looked to reach no higher than his knee. The castle ahead was still absurdly huge - there were clouds eating the tallest towers - but everything seemed to have become a more... human-normal proportion.

Except for the front gate, which was at least five times his height. The portcullis groaned as something began to pull it up.

Jack floated above the floor, with plenty of room overhead and to either side. It would have been possible to ride a horse, three abreast, down the hall with plenty of room between, and with enough headspace to fly a hawk. At least, he thought, while the exterior had been nothing but grim, gray stone, the interior was a bit more cheerful. The stone had been softened with paintings of alien scenes
- paintings that moved, more like the view through a window than, say, a TV screen - and tapestries depicting alien histories every few feet.

He saw purple grass, and orange water, and beings with four arms, others that seemed to be nothing but tentacles from the waist down. Eventually, he stopped looking at either the pictures or the tapestries, and just focused on going straight ahead.

Ahead, the hall split into a T-junction, leaving him able to go either left or right. Both directions were unlit as he approached, but when he reached the edge of shadows, the left arm lit up, though he couldn't tell where the light was coming from.

Well. To the right he went.

Following the lights took him down countless hallways, and he lost track of how many turns he'd taken rather quickly. There were stairs, which he flew up, until he reached what he hoped was the final hallway to his destination. Unlike the others he'd gone through, the paintings showed earth-like scenes, and the tapestries were replaced with marble statues and copper sculptures.

The hallway ended, the strangest door Jack had ever seen at the very end. There were statues flanking the door. To the left, made out of a dark gray marble flecked with black and veined in lighter grey, Bunny stood at guard, eyes narrowed and suspicious. To the right, made out of the whitest marble Jack had ever seen, stood… himself. His image lounged at ease, leaning against a marble staff, a knowing smirk curving his lips.

Jack poked his own mouth. "Are they really that narrow?" he asked, before looking at the door. It was a mirror. But… not.

Up above was an inscription familiar to anyone who knew about the fictional Mirror of Erised in Harry Potter. As for what was reflected…

The Jack in the mirror had white hair and eyes, thank god; he'd spent too long as a spirit to be comfortable with the threat of being mortal, and vulnerable, again. But the mirror Jack was holding a young, brown haired woman with a familiar face close to his side. His mother had one hand on his shoulder, the other on his sister's arm. North and Tooth beamed at them from one back corner, Sandy floating over everyone looking delighted. Bunny, fur gleaming, stood next to the mirror-Jack, a book clasped in one hand, dressed in a bright green vest and loose, darker green trousers.

Jack leaned closer, his mirror-image doing the same. Mirror-Jack looked happy, almost glowing with it, his slightly longer hair held back with what looked, at first, like a braided cord. With closer examination, it was braided silver wire.

"Hah," he muttered, retreating from the mirror. "A fake. I've never wanted a crown."

Mirror Jack shrugged, and gestured, body language conveying 'well, it was worth a try', before the image faded from view.

The mirror's surface went dark, as if it were a pane of glass and he was looking at the backs of drawn curtains. Good enough. He walked forward - and through the mirror.

And out into a forest glade, the sort depicted in medieval manuscripts. Jack looked around, at the towering trees, the moss covered rocks, and the lush, green grass, and then finally turned to his host.

"You know, you could have just said you didn't want to see me," he said.
Mother Nature smiled, but didn't look up from the embroidery in her hands. "Good afternoon, Jack," she said. "Why don't you want a crown?"

The grass might have been thick, but the ground was still a little too hard to simply throw himself down. So he sat, carefully, before lying back. He kept his staff at hand, but otherwise relaxed. "Crowns come with problems," he said. "Don't need that."

"You have problems enough, poking your nose where it's unwanted," she said, obliquely referencing the fiasco with the Jotuns. Jack winced.

"Well, yeah, a crown is one way to grab authority, but I don't really want to have it. I'd rather get involved only if I need to be, you know?"

Mother Nature did glance up at that. "You realize, of course, that if you held the authority rightfully yours -"

"No," Jack said, as firmly as he could. "I'm no king. I will have all of zero crowns, thank you very much."

She smiled, and inclined her head. "I am rebuked. Very well, no crowns of winter. I assume you are here for the seedling?"

"You did say after Easter." His last visit, a quick in-and-out, she'd told him 'maybe' and sent him away. Now there were a whole host of butterflies in his stomach; he clenched his fists, and stared at Mother Nature.

She hummed in agreement, and finally set the needlework down. Jack glanced at it, and then blinked. Somehow, the picture was one, moving and two, both of an animal - some kind of crocodile - and a DNA ladder, all at once.

That was… weird.

"Here we go," Mother Nature said, and lifted up a basket. It was woven out of willow withes, with bark and leaves left on. The basket wasn't very big, but the sapling inside it wasn't very big either. It poked up out of the plug of dirt, about the same size as Jack's thumb, looking… like a plant. One of the needle-leaf versions.

"Were you expecting something else?" she asked sounding amused.

"I guess not." Well, maybe an adult plant, but now that he thought about it, that seemed silly. She'd restarted a plant from dead scraps of roots and twigs. Seemed a bit much to expect her to add on ten thousand years at the same time.

"Take care to hold the basket, don't touch the sapling. It is over-sensitive to magical energies yet, and yours would be a bit much for such a little thing." Mother Nature caressed the top of the sapling, and hummed. "And if you would, plant the willow somewhere with water."

… Of course the basket was made out of a living plant. He really shouldn't have been surprised.

"Sure thing," he said, and took the basket. "Uh, is there a faster way out? The way in… took a while."

She took a deep breath, eyes narrowed, the star-sparks in her eyes becoming the same shade as shattered bone. "I am angry," she said, volcanoes rumbling deep in her voice. "I had thought - and then to discover this -!"
Jack cradled the basket carefully, and cleared his throat. "What, uh, is it something I can help with?"
he asked.

Her face immediately fell, and she slumped over. Around them, the clearing began to darken, the leaves skipping yellow and orange and going straight to late-autumn brown. They began to fall off the tree, a very odd, somewhat crunchy rain.

"Oh, Jack," she said, and stared at her hands. "I never realized… the Pooka, you see. What Pitch Black did to them. Has Bunny talked about this?"

"Hasn't even told me they're dead," Jack said, eyes narrowed. "You told me they were dead."

"So I did," she murmured, and sighed. "There is dead… and then there is… well. What do you know of Fearlings?"

Jack swallowed, and shook his head. "Their name makes my skin crawl?"

Mother Nature smoothed a hand over her dress, which changed. What had been a dead ringer for any number of medieval fantasy gowns, pure white and ornate, became a more modern creation. It was cloud-gray up at her shoulders, darkening and becoming a deep orange down at the hem. It could have been made from the lightest silk, with how it billowed around her body, while she did nothing but sit still.

"Fearlings are… shadows and fear made physical. I mentioned them before, with the destruction of the Golden Age. When I told you of the Pooka's fate, I failed to mention, as I did not know, that the Fearlings had tried to make the Pooka into more of their kind."

Jack shivered. "There's Fearlings that used to be Pooka?" he asked.

"Pooka make for poor monsters," she said, and stood up. "There is much I need to look into, before we speak further upon this matter. I will walk you out."

Jack collected the basket and his staff, and nodded. Mother Nature was a beautiful and terrifying image as she walked before him, the colours on her dress shifting like an actual sunset. They didn't walk for very long, only a few minutes, before they reached the edge of her domain; a line of power, silver-white but rippling with other colours as if the power was flexing, breathing.

"I will get back to you, on this matter. It might take as little as a year, but it will like as not take much longer. Do your best to put it from your mind." Mother Nature rested one hand on his forehead. Jack did his best not to cringe away; her warmth was almost painful, and his scalp felt singed.

"I will," he promised, and relaxed when she stopped touching him.

"Then go. And, Jack?"

He glanced back, skin prickling from the magic radiating from the boundary.

Mother Nature inclined her head once, in a nod. "Good job."

Aster peeked out over the rim of the rabbit hole, checking for yeti and elves before hopping out. The tunnel closed, and he sauntered through the melting drifts of snow to the cabin. The visit with Tooth had gone well, and he'd gone from there to Taiwan. Taroko National Park had several fascinating mountain varieties of otherwise familiar plants, and a number of areas inaccessible for humans.

There'd been one good ledge, with a view of the pocket valley below, as well as the not-so-distant
coastline. His mum had always been fond of mountains, and his da had been the one to haul him off to the shore, teach him to swim.

Well, as much as any Pooka ever swam. Being able to adapt, to breathe nearly any medium, didn't make swimming all that urgent. But some found it fun, and swimming was easier than walking along the bottom of the ocean.

It'd be a good spot. Some risk of storms, he supposed, or tsunamis, but better either of those than tank tracks.

Aster shivered, and let himself into the house. The fire had been banked, but the room was still warm. Jack wasn't here; Aster could neither see nor hear him, but he wasn't worried. As annoyed as North had been, he'd been more upset with Jack. Probably the 'betrayal' of a winter spirit moving against Santa, or some nonsense like that.

Maybe, if North hadn't been so shocked at Aster playing a prank, of all things, Jack would've gotten off easier.

He shrugged, and headed into the kitchen. The stove was cold, but he got a few coals from the fireplace and some tinder got a good flame going in under a minute. He set up a pot of water and a small, cast iron pan to heating, and kept an eye on things while he chopped up some of the veg left over from Jack's last little bought of trading - being spirits, the veg was all fresh, either from south of the equator or from the magical version of a hothouse - and deboned and cubed some chicken meat. When the water started boiling, he poured in several cups of rice and then added two cupfuls of sesame oil to the pan.

The oil sizzled when he added the veg and meat, the whole thing starting to smell rather good when he added in a bit of home-made soy sauce. The stir fry was starting to crisp up when the rice was done cooking, and he drained the pot quickly and set the rice aside to sit for a bit while he finished up with the rest of it. It didn't take long, and he divied up two servings of rice and stir fry.

After a quick check on the oven - the fire had died down, and the heat inside had eased some, so it was perfect for keeping the two plates warm. He cleaned up, and just as he was putting the frying pan back, he heard the door open and close.

"Jack?" he called, not that there was any question of who it was. "You escape North?"

"Yeah." Jack said, and leaned against the kitchen doorway. "I brought you something."

Aster raised one eyebrow, and turned to look at him. "Yeah? What? And for that matter, why? And where had Jack gotten this 'something'? He looked wary, and weary.

He reached over and caught the winter spirit up in a careful hug, without even thinking about it. Jack went stiff, and then relaxed into the touch, head pillowed on Aster's chest.

"Yeah," Jack said, and moved his hand in a vague gesture, probably meaning something in the sitting room or outside. "I, uh, actually, this is from when you first arrived. It just took a while."

Aster glanced at the oven, but there was simply no way he'd be able to eat with the curiosity clawing up his spine. "Mind if I take a peek before we get to the tucker?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jack said, and moved his hand in a vague gesture, probably meaning something in the sitting room or outside. "I, uh, actually, this is from when you first arrived. It just took a while."

From back then? It'd been months. Aster glanced at the oven, but there was simply no way he'd be able to eat with the curiosity clawing up his spine. "Mind if I take a peek before we get to the tucker?" he asked.

"Yeah. Sorry. It took so long. Things… happened."

Aster tilted his head to the side, and stepped out into the sitting room, Jack tucked under one arm
like… like the cobber he was.

Hell of a time to realize he had a best friend, he supposed, but Jack was a wriggly, grasping bastard. He'd probably laugh to hear himself described that way, especially since it was Aster's own heart clutched tight in those greedy hands.

At first, he didn't see anything different, and started to turn towards the exterior door, but Jack stopped him.

"On the table," he said, shifting to press just a little closer to Aster's side.

Aster hummed, and looked at the little table between the two chairs. Even with Jack's direction, it took him a second; it was a very small pot, a fistful of dirt and a scrap of green.

"A plant?" he asked, stepping away and towards the table.

"Mother Nature helped," Jack said. He had hold of his sweater hem, and was wringing it between his hands. "It, uh, took a bit; the twigs and roots were dried out, so she had to bring 'em back before they could be, uh. You know. Encouraged to start over."

Aster shook his head, Jack's babbling making absolutely no sense.

Until he crouched down and took a good, close look at the green scrap.

The little sprout of a Norway Spruce was at once unfamiliar and horribly, wonderfully familiar.

All at once he was on the floor, chest aching and Jack's fingers digging into his shoulders. His blue eyes blazed into Aster's from inches away, the emotion so intense it stole his breath all over again.

"- okay?" Jack's voice seemed to reach him through several inches of water, or - but as Jack talked, the clearer he became. "Bunny? Bunny, can you hear me? C'mon, blink or something, your eyeballs will dry out at this rate."

"Jack?" he croaked. He reached up, hands moving and grasping without conscious direction, gripping the front of Jack's sweater with desperate strength. "Jack?"

"Hey," Jack said, easing backwards. The ferocity in his eyes eased, though he continued to look worried. "You kinda stopped breathing there."

Aster leaned forward and pressed the top of his head to Jack's chest. "The spruce," he said. Did the earth shake? No, that was just him. "My parents' - my parents' spruce. You - you?"

But that made no sense. Jack was a winter spirit. He made it snow. He didn't do anything with plants, except frost them.

Jack ran his hands over Aster's shoulders, smoothing out the fur. "Mother Nature," he said. "I took a few of the - of the pieces - and she did it. I thought - these things - it's important. Right?"

The corners of his eyes itched with tears. "When?" he demanded. Had Jack gone back, or -?

"When I brought you home," Jack said, as if it were as simple as that.

Aster shook harder, throat closing around a keen. He clenched his eyes shut, but a few tears squeezed out anyways. Back then? Even then?

"Jack," he gasped, and sobbed.
At once Jack pressed forward, wrapping around Aster as much as he could. The tight grips on his fur threatened to yank it out by the roots, but the pain was grounding. Kept him firmly in his body, when it felt like the ground had dropped out from under him.

His parents' shrine, the tree. It wasn't the same tree, but at the same time, it was. And Jack had been the one to save it, to bring the pieces to Mother Nature, to ask for her favour. Jack, who opened his home, Jack who had given him shelter and sanctuary.

The tree was not the shrine. He could build a new one.

But he didn't have to.

He sniffled, and shifted, so he wasn't so much huddling under Jack but leaning against him, head on the young man's shoulder, nose pressed to Jack's neck. He sighed, eyes barely open, enough to see blurs of colour.

As though sensing Aster could think again, now that his emotions had ebbed, Jack let go of his tight grip on Aster's fur and began to pet his head and back. It felt good, nothing like the nasty pats from other people when they treated him like an animal. He relaxed further into the contact, every muscle going lax, until - if not for Jack propping him up - he might well have slid down and become a boneless puddle on the floor.

"I thought you could plant it here," Jack said. "When it's big enough."

Aster sighed. Here, where the tree would be safe, he could make it a shrine again. The little thing was in no shape to go outside now, likely would spend a few years inside, but that would just give him time to gather the rocks, prepare the soil.

"Yeah," he said, tongue thick and clumsy in his mouth. "I'd like that. An' then… I could introduce you to them. My parents."

Jack hummed, and began stroking his fingers down Aster's ears. "I'd like that," he said.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this is a bit late - it's actually Thursday, technically, since I'm posting this after work. -shrug- Such is life - I went horseback riding this morning, and wow it's cold. Kinda shocked all ideas of thinking out of my brain until after I was on my way in to the daily grind. That said... Yes. Mother Nature's domain constantly changes. Normally it's, y'know, wilderness. What, exactly, it means for the personification of that wilderness to make her domain into something a little more regimented...
Aster wasn't sure when, or at what point, Jack's home became his. There wasn't any one moment he could point to, no comment or gesture he could hold up as the instant. He tended to his parents' spruce. Within the year it looked like an actual sapling, according to Jack, a full foot high and bristling with tiny needles.

He may have fed the little tree with his magic, doing what he could to let it grow faster, stronger. And so what if he had? He had energy to spare, with frequent meals and a safe place to sleep.

Jack worked on the gazebo and the room he'd 'gifted' Aster with, all at the same time. Aster tried to help, and Jack let him do a little - mostly digging holes for the gazebo posts - but otherwise told him to 'go away and let me work.'

He went out, and tended shrines for his family and his people. He visited the Daintree Rainforest, several times in a month. At some point, that first year living with Jack, walking along the forest paths stopped hurting. Australia was the most like home he'd ever found, the Daintree Rainforest the most like where he'd been born, and instead of wrenching at old scars and older longings, being there soothed his grief instead.

By the time winter returned, he was comfortable in Jack's home. The gazebo was finished - which made his trips to and from Jack's domain easier, if only because he didn't jump out only to get covered in snow - and the framing for the new rooms was up. Jack decorated for Christmas, again, though their Christmas tree stayed outside. Aster couldn't grumble too much about the holiday, not when it made Jack so happy to put up branches of holly and ivy, bake an absurd number of cookies and cakes, and send out cards to all his mates.

It did give Aster a chance to meet the Native spirits that helped Jack with his letters. They were all minor spirits, just above the level of a sprite, akin to a dryad. He could only reason that they were the spirits of animals, not the Archetypes most people thought of when using the term "Native Spirits". The host of crows, hawks, falcons, and one eagle were only a little smarter than their mortal counterparts, able to follow directions and be amused at Jack's command to 'be as annoying as possible until they give you a reply', but that was it.

If he'd had anyone to write to, he would have stolen a bird or two's services for his own use. But he didn't, not really, so he simply smiled over it all and let Jack add his name to his Christmas messages. There was no harm to it, after all, no reason to protest.

When Easter came, it seemed only natural for Jack to join him in the preparations, keeping him company, hauling water and baskets of bulbs, keeping the Warren alive with laughter and chatter.

Jack dragged him around, after Easter, demanded tours of Australia and gave them for Southern Argentina and Chile. Aster introduced Jack to wild Tasmanian Devils, which… might have been a mistake. For a year he kept finding the little buggers in Jack's domain, and having to return them. Jack, of course, pouted and sulked, when his arguments - mostly "but they're orphans, Bunny!" and "but look, this one's sick, we can heal him up and put him back!" - failed to sway Aster. It made him glad that Jack hadn't met any kiwi birds… and then, of course, Jack discovered kiwi birds.

At least none of the animals came to any harm from Jack's 'helpful' attempts at relocation. At last the
hoon's attempts faded, and then ended entirely, when winter began up north again.

After that Easter, he introduced Jack to koalas. A single meeting, and then a night listening to a couple koalas rooting like it'd be impossible to ever root again with the dawn, cured Jack of his thieving ways… at least of Australian animals.

Before he knew it, it'd been five years, and Jack's home was his. He reorganized the shelves, went looking for books to bring back for evening reads. He cooked or cleaned, and if the chickens hated him still, he was getting used to the bees.

It was - he was home, and the day - the hour - he realized what had happened, he'd bolted.

And returned the same evening, feeling sheepish. Jack didn't even seem aware he'd tried to leave permanently, welcoming him home with a hug and a plate of roast chicken and rhubarb pie.

He'd stayed up late that night, and the next, wrestling with his fears. Every home he'd ever had was destroyed eventually. But, he'd reasoned, this wasn't just his home; it was Jack's first, and if Pitch could steal from Aster, he wouldn't be able to do the same to Jack.

It was fortunate he'd come to that conclusion, because after five years, Jack had declared the room he'd gifted Aster, finished.

And the sight of it would have sent him running all over again, if he hadn't already dealt with his fears.

"Oh," Aster said, frozen in the doorway.

"Well?" He felt Jack bouncing behind him, clearly impatient. "Are you going to go in? Or just stand out here and gawk? C'mon, Bunny!"

Aster swallowed, and took a careful step into the new room. He'd expected something like the sitting room; pine boards and a rustic simplicity, but that… wasn't what he got.

The walls were made out of the same pine trunks as the rest of the building; he'd seen that much from the outside while he did the few chores Jack allowed him. The space had been kept shrouded with a tarp, and now he knew why.

Windows. Each wall was mostly window, with glass - enchanted, he suspected, considering the size and handmade nature of it - everywhere. One large window took up most of the side wall, looking out over the vegetable garden that Aster had expanded, while two large ones took up the back wall, looking out over the expanse of wild grasses and flowers Jack kept for his bees. The space was open and airy, full of light though the day outside was a bit gray, threatening rain.

Instead of the pine flooring, there was redwood, except for just around the fireplace. There, several large slabs of cream-coloured stone protected against stray sparks, even as the fireplace ensured this room would stay warm year round.

"I have a fireplace?" he wondered.

Jack… snickered. "Never even noticed I was making the chimney bigger?" he asked, and nodded. "Well, more of a stove, but…"

If it was a stove, it was one made out of stone. There was a small spit, so he could swing a kettle over the fire for hot water, and the fireplace was deep enough that Jack had managed to fit a small
grate over the fire, perfect for a pot. He wouldn't be able to cook much over his little fire, but he'd be able to heat water and keep hot food warm, and that was more than he really needed.

Aster swallowed, touching the top of the fireplace with gentle fingertips. The stone was cold, of course; no need for a fire at the height of summer, even with how chilly it remained in Jack's domain. Still, he could see the appeal of it come winter, when the temperature plummeted.

One downside to living with a winter spirit; while the temperature remained easily between fifteen and twenty degrees Celsius in the summer, it was usually minus twenty-five to thirty degrees once the snow fell.

Or colder.

Jack had hung curtain rods above the windows, though as yet there were no curtains. There were shelves along the back wall, and the side. In the one corner, positioned to best catch the light from the windows, was a wicker-work, egg-shaped scoop chair, piled with soft looking pillows and draped with a knitted blanket. There was a table, made out of some pale wood, polished smooth. The table was the oddest thing Aster had seen in awhile; down the middle, the wood had been carved away, with blue-tinted glass filling the space. The join between wood and glass was so perfectly smooth his nails didn't catch when he drew them along the surface.

"It'll go up on an incline," Jack said, moving over to demonstrate. The table went all the way up to a forty-five degree angle, and back down to flat, a clever little locking mechanism ensuring it'd never collapse on him.

It would make a perfect drawing table, Aster realized, adjustable to whatever angle he preferred, in the right spot to get light from the windows during the day, and - he looked up - a hook hanging down from the ceiling, perfect height and spot to hang a lamp from when it got darker. There was a chair, almost identical to the kitchen tables, though the seat was softened with another cushion.

There wasn't much more to the room, despite its size; it was obvious enough that Jack had deliberately left it empty so Aster could fill it with the things he preferred, rather than Jack putting his personal stamp on it.

It was a room that Aster could turn into whatever he wanted. There was enough space he could put a bed in it, there was the fireplace he could cook single-person meals at, and the table went flat so he could eat off it…

Jack had given him, effectively, something like a single-room apartment.

His own space. For whatever he felt like.

Aster swallowed, and stared blindly out the window. Was… that what Jack wanted, for Aster to get his own bed? But he liked curling up with Jack! He - wait. No, that was ridiculous. Just because there was enough room for a bed, that didn't mean Jack wanted him to leave. Besides, Aster thought, a smile beginning to twitch the corners of his mouth. If he got his own bed, who would Jack cuddle? Poor little Jack, who whined in his sleep, tossed and turned and got tangled up in his nightgown and sheets, when he slept alone.

Not that he admitted to such restlessness, the larrikin, but it was adorable all the same. If Aster had been any younger, he probably would have made a habit of staying up long enough for Jack to go to bed first. Maybe gather evidence.

"It's a beaut," he said, turning to Jack, who was starting to look worried. "Do - do the windows
Jack relaxed, and shook his head. "Sorry, no. But with the front and back door open, the wind should be able to get a good breeze through here, if you want one."

"Nah," Aster said, stepping out and into the new hallway. There were two archways, one to either side of the main fireplace that led back to the two new rooms, and the new back door. He hesitated, and then wrapped Jack up in a tight hug. "Thanks, mate."

Jack hugged him back. "I figured you'd like more windows than me," he said, voice slightly muffled by Aster's fur.

No kidding. Aster let Jack go, and started for the sitting room. "I'll have to get art supplies," he said, voice wavering slightly. Paints, parchment and canvases. Sketchbooks. Brushes; you couldn't use a brush meant for watercolours with oil paints. For that matter, did he want to try the new stuff humans made, or work with the old materials which were tricky to make, highly poisonous even for a creature as adaptable as a Pooka, and harder for a spirit to get hold of than, say, a mortal.

… He missed the days when he still had one foot in the mortal realm. Things had been a little easier, then.

"Well," Jack said, pulling away and giving him a gentle tug towards the sitting room. "Y'know Christmas?"

Aster raised one eyebrow. "Yeah…"

"North might've been giving you paintbrushes for Easter work, but he's been stockpiling other things." Jack tried to skip, one arm still around Aster's waist. "Now that everything's finished… well, almost everything, decorative touches are up to you…"

Aster refused to cringe. "You made North get me art supplies?"

"Of a quality suited to a master artist," Jack confirmed.

It was surprisingly easy to fill that room with his personal stamp, if only because people kept giving him things. He put the little pot with his parents' tree by the windows, where it'd get plenty of light. He added a couch, gifted to him by Tooth and ever so slightly out of place with the rich purple cushions and almost spindly legs, at least compared to the heavier wood that Jack preferred. Still, it was comfortable enough, and even if the egg-chair was, well, an egg and thus better, he couldn't really stretch out in it.

North got him a Faberge egg, which took pride of place on one of the shelves, and Sandy got him a music box. The tinkling little melody was actually quite charming, so he frequently wound it up and left it playing while he got used to the art supplies North had given him.

There was an easel, for canvases. There was a stack of canvases, in a range of sizes. There were oil paints in a number of shades, the brushes and cleaners and pallet boards to go with it all. There were water colours and the thick paper to go with, pencil crayons and crayons and colouring books, stacks of plain white paper and other stuff with pale lines Jack said was meant for graphs, but would do well enough for other things. There were sticks of charcoal and chalk, stiff paper both white and black.

Jack must have dropped a word in his believers' ears, because that Easter, he sent out the eggs around Burgess, and found them waiting. They each had a small trinket, the sort that they got from
those inferior chocky eggs, Pillsbury, or whatever it was called.

"Kinder Surprise," Monty had corrected, grinning. "You really don't like anyone else's chocolate, do you?"

Aster had accepted the little trinkets, grumbling about Americans and their tile grout pretending to be edible. They'd giggled, and Sophie had given him a picture she'd done. The roughly drawn, gray figure held hands with an equally roughly done pink and yellow figure, clearly him and Sophie. Flowers hovered in a blue sky, along with a smiling sun, and a blue, brown, and white figure with a smile almost bigger than its head.

He hung that up on the wall, once he'd had Jack suitably frame it.

Of course, the moment one group of kiddies did something, all of them started it up. The Easter after that, he found himself collecting flowers, drawings, necklaces made out of string or paper clips, those little tinker toys, and a few confused kids even left plates of cookies out on park benches or back porches.

What was he, Santa?

And of course he ate the cookies, the kids had gone to the trouble of putting them out. Jack didn't need to laugh so much when Aster told the wanker, though.

Another five years, and that, too, had become routine. He'd lived with Jack a full decade, and he almost couldn't remember how he'd lived before that. He had a folder full of artwork from children, ranging from scribbles to something a little more recognizable. He had shelves full of painted eggs and Faberge eggs, and vaguely egg-shaped bits and bobs of jewelry. Jack had given him a key to the gate - not that Aster knew where to go to find the gate, other than just outside of Burgess - a pendant, in the shape of a six-pointed snowflake. He wore it on a leather thong around his neck.

If, sometimes, he spent entire days in bed, reading glasses perched on his nose while he worked slowly through a book, well… he'd earned it. If, sometimes, winter winds howling around the house woke him, and he spent an hour or two shivering until he fell back asleep, well… he'd spent more time sleeping out in all weather, usually with very little shelter. It was habit.

If he kept a pot of tea on his studio fire at all times, if he kept a bit of stew going more often than not, well… he'd felt the pinch of hunger and thirst too many times to count, and never wanted to do that again. Jack was the only one around to criticize, but he never did.

Monthly meetings ensured he talked to other people, though conversations with Jack never turned stale and repetitive. He tended to the shrines, and looked for new varieties of plants and eggs when the whim took him.

There were times he could say he wasn't just satisfied with his lot, but happy.

It had been a very long time since he'd last been happy.

If, now and then, he longed for a closer relationship with the children, like Jack had, well… There were ways to work towards it. Myths and legends changed. Stories evolved. Perhaps one day, he'd be able to pop out in near any park in the world, and find an ankle biter to nurse for a couple hours.

Until that time, he'd bask in what he had. He well knew the value of it, and wasn't about to give it up.
For the record, we are now between twelve and thirteen years past the movie. Bunny has been living with Jack for a decade. Work has been busy and I haven't had as much time to write, so keep an eye on the posting schedule, it might (MIGHT) need to slow down, we'll see.


Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Bunny? Bunny - Oh!"

Aster lowered the ax, and looked back over his shoulder. "Tooth," he said, and swallowed an annoyed grumble. "Don't you know not to get that close?"

"Sorry," she snapped. "I didn't realize you'd be swinging that thing like a weapon. Is there a problem?" she asked, switching from annoyed to worried in a blink. "You didn't argue with Jack, did you?"

He didn't growl at the name. Or turn back to the wood pile and start muttering about frozen-brained fools with all the self-preservation instincts of a deceased rutabaga. He just cleared his throat. For several minutes.

"Bunny," Tooth said, moving to a safer distance. "What is it?"

He slammed the ax down onto a log, and split it cleanly in half. "Jack," he spat, "is going to one of General Winter's shindigs."

Tooth blinked, and tilted her head. "He... is a winter spirit," she pointed. "Doesn't he... have to?"

"He's going inta that nest of vipers alone," Aster clarified. He'd asked if Jack was going with any allies, and the fool of a fucking idiot had just looked confused. As if he wasn't going to be rubbing elbows with a bunch of homicidal maniacs. And, alright, he might have gotten a bit annoyed at Jack's naivety, but there'd been no need for Jack to start snarling at him like that.

Past decade might as well not have happened, considering all the vicious words they'd slung at each other. Only... not. Jack had brought up Easter Sunday of '68, Aster had countered with the Titanic, until by the end he didn't know if they were arguing about how dangerous Jack wasn't, how dangerous the other winter spirits were, or... what.

He did know that Jack had called him a 'long-eared nosey parker living vicariously through more interesting people', which had... hurt. A bit more than the less creative, more vulgar insults had, actually.

Tooth sighed. "North's going."

Aster brightened, and then frowned. "Why? He's not -"

"Technically he is. His invitation said 'be there or be dead', so I suppose he counts," Tooth sat down on a handy log, waiting to be turned into firewood, and folded her hands over one knee. "Jack will hardly be without friends."

North, a winter spirit? Well, yeah, he supposed so, Christmas being a primarily north of the equator thing. And in December. Russians needed to worry about digging through snow drifts around Christmas time, while down in Oz, the worry was more about the streets melting.

Which was not hyperbole, whatever North thought.
"No," he decided, and went back to cutting wood. "North's no use," he said, between swings. "He's a homicidal maniac himself."

If she'd had a drink, Tooth would've done a spit take. "Bunny," she said, once the coughing subsided. "Please tell me you didn't call Jack a homicidal maniac!"

Jack? Aster snorted. "Course not. He's the only one with any sense. It's the rest of them that's the problem."

The Snow Queen, countless Wendigo, Jotuns, Old Man Winter, General Winter; Ghang Sying Ghay, the Snow Lion, was fairly cheerful…but still a lion. Hades was technically a winter spirit. Boreas was an arse, Ullr was a Jotun and an arse, Father Frost was an uppity little thing. There were ghost-types that had frozen or drowned in winter, Yuki-onna who often did the freezing and drowning of idiot travelers in Japan, and he didn't know what all else. Sure, a few of them were supposed to be good sorts…but most weren't.

Tooth rolled her eyes. "Would you feel any better if I said I was going? North asked me as his plus-one."

Some people had the weirdest courtship habits.

"No. Not really. You'll be keeping North from getting into fights… I hope…" Tooth looked innocent. Aster didn't trust it. "And that's a full time job, even for a warrior queen."

"You say that as if I'd start a fight before North." Tooth settled on the log as if it was a throne, looking innocuous. Warrior queens didn't get Tooth's reputation by letting other people throw punches for them. She was quite obviously lying.

Tooth re-folded her wings, and stared at him until it got creepy and he looked up. "Bunny. Jack can ask someone as a plus one. Why don't you go with him?"

Aster growled, and chopped up another log. "Oh, that's a bloody good idea. Spring spirit. And you, North, and Jack to back me up when the fight inevitably starts."

"And Sandy. He's going."

"Why?"


Aster mentally set that aside for later. "So, then, the five of us. Against every spirit General Winter can impress, threaten, or bribe into attending his party. Great."

She rolled her eyes, and stood up. "Did Jack leave the invitation anywhere?"

"Kitchen table. Tooth?"

Tooth ignored him, and took the new back door into the house. Aster stared after her, shrugged, and went back to his wood cutting… with a little less anger than earlier.

Tooth came back with a card held triumphantly over her head. "Found it," she said, as if it'd been buried under mountains of paperwork. Which it hadn't been; the table had been cleared off when Jack had gotten the letter, and with the winter spirit's obsession with everything being neat and tidy, the card had stood out, clearly out of place.
"Also," Tooth added, "I like your studio. Especially the drifts of paper in the corners."

"What drifts of paper?" In deference to Jack - it was his home, after all - he did his best to pick up the mess once a week. Though it was hard to remember. Sometimes - often, actually - a drawing or a water colour was wrecked beyond all recognition, and he had to toss it.

His little fireplace was a good spot to get rid of the rejects, thus far. He wasn't touching the canvases and the oil paints until he could draw a straight line again, at least.

Tooth flew up and hovered close enough to pat him on the head. "It's okay, Bunny," she said. "It's still a very nice studio."

"Tooth. What drifts of paper?"

"Never mind." She waved the card in front of his nose. "No violence at the party."

"What?" Oh, right. Aster snatched the card and squinted at the tiny writing, muttered a curse and held it out at arm's length, muttered another curse and shoved the card back at Tooth. "Hold a mo, I'll be right back."

Tooth sighed, but he ignored her. The new back door was much more efficient than having to go around to the front of the cabin; he went straight through to the sitting room, scooped up his glasses off the book he was reading, and headed back outside. Tooth covered her mouth with one hand; everyone seemed to find his glasses amusing. He had no idea why; the egg-shape was better for his facial shape, and had been standard for every set of Pookan reading glasses. The green tint helped with making the letters clearer. A Pooka could see almost three times as many colours as a human could, and what a human considered 'plain white paper', to a Pooka, very much wasn't plain or white… and the letters could get very strange.

He adjusted his glasses, and peered at the invitation. Cordially invited, fancy dress, time and date… huh. How about that. Protection guaranteed, RSVP with number of companions. "Where would a winter spirit even find a date?" he asked.

Tooth stole his glasses, and peered through them. "Nearsighted?"

"Far, and give me those." He tucked them into a pouch on his belt, and turned the card over in his hands. "I could go with Jack. Would need to check my old dags, of course."

"Of course. And as for dates, they probably bring each other."

Aster switched to flicking the card against his fingers. "That might work," he decided. Of course, if he'd done what he kept making mental notes to do and started teaching Jack how to fight without magic, he probably wouldn't have gotten so worried.

Tooth bussed him on the cheek. "There's just one thing you're forgetting," she said, and smiled when he tilted his head. "Jack might not let you come with him."

She turned and flew away before he could protest, leaving him with a sinking feeling and a lot of chopped wood.

"-and I know he didn't mean to say I'm helpless, but he fucking well said I'm fucking well helpless," Jack snarled, and thumped his staff down against the iced-over carpet.

North hummed in response, and turned the little ice carving to get a better angle. Jack glared at him,
and thumped his staff again. North looked up. "I am listening."

"Could've fooled me!"

"You repeat yourself five times in row, at certain point must assume answers not required." Jack ignored the Russian accent strong enough to give a bear a concussion, and thumped his staff a third time. Frost began creeping over the ceiling. North sighed. "Fine. What are you wanting me to say? You have to admit, with few exceptions, most winter spirits have… reputations."

"Which are put on hold during General Winter's parties. Not that it matters," Jack added. "If you'd been listening. I'm not angry about what he called 'em, I've said worse - it's the part where I supposedly need protection from them. I deal with them all the time! He knows that! I've come home with the cuts and broken bones to prove it!"

"But has he seen you do this?" North asked. "Yes, he has seen aftermath, but we all know how fast you heal, now."

Right, right, greenstick-fracture your arm at the beginning of a meeting and be, essentially, fully healed by the end of three hours… people noticed. More because Jack had fallen off North's second-story railing along the landing, which was not his usual modus operandi. Otherwise, he probably could've gotten away with not saying anything and also not getting attacked by medically-minded yeti.

"I guess." Jack hopped up onto his staff and crouched over like a particularly skinny and sullen gargoyle. North looked unimpressed by either the balancing act or the glower. "Still not the point. I'm everyone's favourite. Even if General Winter wasn't poised to come down like an avalanche on a rule-breaker, no one's going to be so much as snide at me. And he wasn't listening."

"Bunny is very protective of you. Charming, isn't it?"

Jack eased up on the glower. "You're being way too nice to him about this, Waapa-mškwaawi*. Way too freaking nice. You're supposed to take my side."

"Why?" North asked. "Because I too am winter?" He shrugged, and scrutinized his little ice carving. It seemed to meet his approval, and he went back to carefully etching in feathers. "Bunny, I have known him longer. He has been my friend even longer than Sandy and Tooth; we formed it upon recipes and studying books older than me."

Jack rolled his shoulders. "How old are you?" he asked. "Exactly? I know the Santa Claus thing is about two centuries…"

"Getting closer to three. I delivered presents to a few villages here and there, but it wasn't until eighteen-twenty-three before the belief-magic really kicked in."

"So between three and four hundred years. Just a little older than I am."

"Probably closer to four centuries, and most of that knowing Bunny, yes," North said, rather placidly. Jack supposed that after a certain point, the fact that one's life was going to measure in centuries kind of lost its impact. It hadn't hit him until after he'd gotten his memories back, particularly the part where he'd been thinking 'when I get old and creaky at forty…'

And when it had hit, he'd loosed a storm on Antarctica that had made Easter Sunday of '68 look like a light dusting of snow.
Of course, most of his storms made Easter Sunday of '68 look like a light dusting of snow. That was why he usually didn't create storms. Entire seaboards got closed down.

"Has he always been this much of a worry-wart?" Seriously. Jack could take care of himself. He gave General Winter, Snow Queen, and Baba Yaga cookies and cake every Christmas. That was two of the most powerful winter spirits - and one chaotic forest spirit who showed up because she wanted to and no one was going to risk throwing her out and getting cursed - right there, figuring they owed him because he wrote their name on a spice cake.

Bunny, as the person who helped him make and bake the spice cake, really should have known better.

_Did he have allies_, indeed.

North turned the carving tool over in his fingers. "The way he is with you? No. In general, somewhat, yes."

"Gee, don't I feel special."

"You should, he usually lets us jump into shark infested waters on our own. And then has a decade of 'I told you so' to dump on our heads."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "There's a story or two there."

North raised an eyebrow back. "Or twenty. If it were me, or Tooth, he would say he would like to go with us… and then he would stand by the wall making snide commentary while we got into fights."

"Not Sandy?"

"Everyone loves Sandy," North said, and waved one hand in dismissal. "No one would think to be cruel to him, or even snub him. Except Pitch."

Well, yeah, Pitch was a massive jerk.

"So it is just me," Jack said. He stepped down off his staff, and caught it with one hand. "Huh."

North put his sculpture down again. "Jack, you have unique place in Bunny's life."

"Huh?"

"You are the first… the only person," North said, his smile just a touch sad, "to notice he needed help. I did not even know he wasn’t living in the Warren, after… well. The few times I visited, I thought he was just… out."

Jack blinked. And blinked again. "You didn’t know?" He’d thought, but… But it made more sense if they hadn’t known, or realized. They hadn’t noticed Jack in three centuries, despite his many efforts to get their attention. Bunny had been hiding his… situation… so of course they didn’t notice.

And the only reason Jack had found out was because he’d stumbled over Bunny in a low moment. If he hadn’t, he never would have found out.

His blood might have run a little cold at the thought, but he was a winter spirit. Cold blood, kinda his thing. Really.

"No," North confirmed. "And even if we had, I doubt we could have done anything. Bunny would
not have allowed it."

Jack snorted, and adjusted the frost patterns on the window until they were spiky. "Ma always said pride’s a dumb thing to cling to," he said. "Mind, she figured God a better thing to hold to, but I don’t know if that’s as much help as she figured it was."

"Hope and faith are important things."

"Hope, yeah. But we don’t have a Guardian of Faith." North snickered, and Jack grinned. "Anyways, you probably could’ve helped. Sandy probably would’ve had to put Bunny in a coma for a couple days, but…"


Jack frowned at North. "Are you implying something?" he asked. Because if that hadn’t been a sly insinuation voice about the garden, he was a monkey. A bright, pink, cartoon monkey.

"Implying? Implying nothing! Am only happy for you both, is all. Bunny needs someone to put smiles on his face and a garden to play in. I am happy, Bunny is happy, you seem happy…" North beamed, and clasped his hands over his belly.

Jack stared at him, completely deadpan, and then caught up the ice carving North was working on with a quick swipe of his staff. He darted into the rafters, faster than North by far. "What’s this?" he asked, mock-surprise in every atom of his being. "Aw, North, making sculptures of the mini-fairies now?"

"That is chickadee," North protested, reduced to hopping up and down under Jack’s perch. "Is not finished!"

Looked finished to him. Every last feather was detailed down to the littlest ruffling, bright eyes open and blank. The frost crawling over the little carving only made it look more alive, not less, so that as he turned it from side to side it seemed to move and shift in his hands.

"Jack, am not joking!"

"Fine." He swung backwards, knees hooked around the rafter beam, and arched his spine so he could look North in the eye. More or less. Like this, he was… actually still shorter than North, just less so. North jumped at the sudden motion, and then glared.

"Here," he said, and offered the little bird. North took it, and started inspecting it to make sure Jack hadn’t broken anything. "Is it for Tooth?"

"Not everything is for Tooth," North mumbled. He picked up the tiny carving tool, and started working on the bird’s face.

"Sure it is. She’s your special friend." Jack twisted, still upside down, and dropped his staff down from foot to hand. He pointed it at North. "The two of you talk together the most, you always smile when you see her, she always smiles when she sees you, you have inside jokes that even Bunny doesn’t get…"}

North’s cheeks were getting progressively redder as Jack talked. It was hilarious, kind of like watching him get drunk.

"And," Jack said, sobering to the point that he dropped down off the rafter and back onto the crook
of his staff. "She goes to you with her problems first. You’re the person she trusts more than anyone else, Nick."

North was practically crimson. Forget drunk, he looked sunburnt. "Tooth is not… special friend… that way," he hedged.

"Pull the other one, it’s got bells on."

Oh yeah, Santa Claus used to be a bandit… Jack should probably have remembered that before…

He ducked the first punch, dodged the second, and then iced North’s feet to the floor before he could try a third. Quite obviously North hadn’t really been trying to connect, but the roar-leap-attack had been freaky enough. The way he kept flexing his arm so the ‘naughty’ tattoo danced and shimmered, also freaky.

And cool. But details.

"Calm down," Jack said, and hopped up onto his staff. "Sheesh, you’d think no one had ever accused you of having a pash for a girl…"

Silence. Long silence, tinted with embarrassment and radiating from North.

"Seriously? You’ve never…?" Courted, or had a pash for anyone, or…

"Tooth is first lady I have ever found interesting, yes," North muttered, in Russian, as if that was going to stop Jack’s magic winter-spirit-insta-translation abilities.

"Wow. That’s, um, does that mean there were guys before?" Jack asked, in the same language.

North jumped like he’d been hit with a cow prod, and then gawked at Jack. "Yes, yes, I understand all the swearing you do." Not that the names of composers were really swearing, but still.

"You never said."

"It never came up." Jack tilted his head to the side. "You didn't answer my question. All guys, before?"

North shifted his weight until the ice encasing his boots cracked and fell away. "No one before," he spat, and moved over to his drinks cabinet.

Oh boy. Jack felt like… like there was ice under his feet, creaking and cracking, and like a dumb lug he just kept walking forward. "Was it just… no one available, or…?"

"Hah!" North poured himself a generous helping of rum, and then tossed it back. "Why does this matter to you?"

"Because you're my friend, and Tooth's my friend, and you seem kinda upset about the whole feelings-for-Tooth thing. And, Guardian of Joy, here, but I want you both to be happy." Jack made a face at the amount of rum North tossed back at that, but didn't protest. North could be a mellow, chatty drunk. He might need the help.

North moved back to his desk, the flush in his cheeks due more to the alcohol than any embarrassment, now. "Fine. Yes, there were… options, then. But I had no interest. Happy?"

"Well, you're not, so no, not really." Jack chanced shifting from his staff to one of the comfortable guest chairs. He had to move a half-carved wooden doll aside, and set it in pride of place atop a stack
of music boxes. "Wanna talk about it?"

"No. But I will talk." North poured some more rum, but only sipped at it, instead of quaffing. "I grew up bandit. Who are not best example for how to woo the ladies. Occasionally caught by this priest or that, sometimes left by whoever was in charge, usually when sick."

Jack kept his wince to himself.

"Priests tried to give me… something. Culture, taming…" North shrugged, and swirled the liquid in his glass. "And Ombric taught me the rest, later. But when with bandits…" He grimaced. "The few women I met, were either worse than the men and to be feared, or… victims of the men, and…"

"I understand." The ransom of a rich captive hadn't been as common as popular literature would have. And even if the bandits were going to risk it, they weren't the type to refrain from… taking advantage of any man or woman they got their grubby little hands on. The Robin Hood types, the honorable thieves, were mostly in stories. And those camps of disreputable but honorable men, had usually been the shell-shocked veterans of the Vietnam War.

He had to admit, he was a little surprised at how generous North was with… everything, considering his upbringing.

"Took over the group, when I was old enough." North finished off the rum in his glass, but didn't immediately pour more in. "Fifteen and leading men. Killers. Some no better than maddened dogs. Maybe things the priests tried to teach me stuck, because I would not stand for it. Went from bandits to mercenaries. And," he added, tilting the empty glass at Jack, "became welcome in towns."

Jack nodded, and settled in to wait it out.

"I got the reputation for doing impossible things. Stealing gold from gods and dragons, exploring bottom of the ocean… the bandit dregs left my men and I had the best, and most loyal to me. I would ride horses across a mountain range in a single night. I…" North sighed, and shook his head. "But that is getting ahead of myself.

"In the towns, I could have had women. Or men, there were those who made their interest obvious even to me. But there were monsters to fight and impossible odds to overcome, and it seemed like such a - such an old person thing to do, yes?"

"What, settling down and getting married? Yeah." Jack shrugged. "Felt like that when I was younger, too."

North looked rueful. "A wife would have gotten in way of doing things, hey? And it never seemed as though I were missing out. Later, when I met Ombric, and began the magic learning… All the passion I never felt for the flesh suddenly roared to life. And I thought, hah, that is why coupling never interested me. I am for magic."

"Was Ombric like that? Forgoing the pleasures of the flesh for intellectual pursuits?"

North looked so shocked that Jack had to swallow a laugh. "No," North gasped. "Oh, no. Ombric was respectful and kind and like king buck through his lady deer. Mortal, spirit, he was honest with all of them but… Oh, no. No, no, no pure intellectual for Ombric."

Jack blinked, and squinted out the window. "Is he still alive?"

"Of course. Ombric is Guardian of Time, and grand mage beside. And… may or may not be making the Viagra companies richer." North coughed, and rubbed the back of his neck. "With spirit-ladies
now, not mortal. Is hard to explain looking the same old man for forty years in the row."

Jack did his best to block out the thought of an old man - looking like his grandfather, all wrinkly, saggy skin and paunch and scrawny limbs, oh god - and one of Aphrodite's nymphs. It was hard, and he gave serious consideration to stealing that bottle of rum and chugging it.

"So, since the magic lessons, still no interest. Except in Tooth."

North shot him a poisonous glare, but nodded. "Tooth is... special."

"Apart from the whole, Tooth is a girl thing, I'd give you serious competition, yeah."

Wow. North's glare went from poisonous to nuclear warhead in point-six seconds. Awesome. Rather scary, but awesome.

Jack held up his hands. "I am very much a homosexual. Women are like… fine works of art, infinitely unique and beautiful in their own ways." Even if he could not understand why anyone found those huge, stretched out earlobes attractive. He could put a fist through some of those stretch-rings! "But they don't get the blood pumping, not like guys do."

North looked faintly alarmed. "You are like… like close cousin. Very close cousin," he began.

"You're not my type," Jack said, as blunt as he could be. North kinda needed it, he looked close to panicking. "Besides, Tooth would kill me."

Oh look, that didn't help with the panicking. Great. Damage control time.

"North," he said, and gestured for the rum. "Give me some of that. And then I'll tell you something about the asexual spectrum..."

Chapter End Notes

* Waapa-mškwaawi - Shawnee for White-Red (literally white: waapa, red: mškwaawi), from http://www.native-languages.org/shawnee_words.htm As I was unable to find "Santa Claus" anywhere I looked, I felt "white-red" was probably the best nickname I could manage. Considering I am neither a linguist nor a student of languages (beyond the poking around I do online to add 'flavouring') it's the best I can do. If there's anyone reading this who does speak Shawnee specifically, and were you willing, I'm reasonably certain I'd be giving Jack more use of the language. Otherwise, I generally put translation convention (the character is speaking another language, but I write it out in English and make narrative note that it's in the other language) in effect, as seen in this and previous chapters.

Also, yes, North is ace in this one. So while he wants to give Tooth pretty things, and spend time with her, and preen her feathers, he would like everyone's pants to stay on, thank you so much.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jack staggered in three days after he'd stormed out, looking mildly concussed. Or drunk.

Aster folded his arms, and raised his eyebrows. "Where've you been?" he asked, as neutral as he could manage.

Jack winced, and reached up with one hand to cradle his forehead. "Please don't shout," he moaned. "I am too hungover for this."

Hungover. Hung - "You've been drinking?"

Jack groaned, and almost clocked himself in the head with his staff when he reached up with both hands. "Bunny…"

Aster huffed, but moved over and caught Jack by the elbows. "Let's get you inside," he said, and half-carried Jack into the cabin. He considered the fireplace for all of half a second, and then turned Jack into the bedroom, where it'd be dark and quiet. Jack moaned with obvious relief when Aster eased him down onto the bed; the winter spirit lay limp while Aster undressed him.

"Nightgown?" he asked, one hand on the wardrobe door.


Right, neither of them had fixed that yet. Aster turned back to the bed, and helped Jack under the sheets. "Lemme get you some water."

Jack cracked his eyes open. "You're a saint," he mumbled, and then winced at the noise.

Aster hummed, and went to the kitchen for the water. He got the promised glass… and then, after a second's thought, a pitcher. Jack's fast healing was great for everything but hangovers, which seemed to take longer than normal to clear up. If that was the trade off, it was an odd one, especially since Jack avoided drinking as much as possible.

"Here you go," he said, and helped Jack sit up enough to drink without drowning. He sucked the water down at an almost worrying speed, and gasped with relief at the end.

"That feels better," he whispered. He sounded better, too.

"I bet." The Pooka crouched down beside the bed, and rested one hand on Jack's shoulder. "What happened?"

Jack sighed, and shifted into a more comfortable position. "Went to North's, yell about you." Aster lifted his chin, but it was wasted on Jack; the winter spirit was keeping his eyes closed. "Turned into a long, long, long talk about sexuality and attraction and why he wants to have all the gooshy romance feelings with Tooth, and none of the sweaty physical… stuff."

"But they love sparring," Aster protested, before he realized what Jack meant. "Oh," he said, neck burning under his fur. "That."

"Yeah," Jack whispered, and smirked. "That. It took… a lot of alcohol to calm him down. And get
through the embarrassment.

"No kidding." Aster had been forced to talk to North about that sort of thing before, and he really preferred listening to chalk squeaking on a blackboard. Though there was something fitting about such a - such an innocent taking the role of Santa Claus. "So that's how you spent the past three days drinking, huh?"

"Leaving out a bunch of details… yeah." Jack groaned, and reached up to cradle his head. "Please… lemme alone to die…"

Aster smirked, and poured the glass full of water again. "Down this and I'll get some tucker rustled up. Something soft," he assured, when Jack whimpered. "But more water you drink, better you'll feel."

"Ow," Jack muttered, but sat up enough to drink the water. "Oh. Thanks."

"No worries." Aster half-filled the glass, and left it on the bedside table. "Catch some sleep, Frostbite, you'll be fine."

"Liar." Jack rolled over, wrapping up in the blankets, and sighed. "But thanks."

Aster left Jack to it, and relocated himself to the kitchen. Something with a lot of liquid, but filling. And soothing for a picky stomach. Humans and their alcohol; he couldn't understand why anyone would willingly down a concoction that poisoned their liver, killed their self-control and good sense, and often stole memories of entire nights. Not to mention the hangover, after. Of course, he had willingly eaten chocolate for a full decade, so he couldn't exactly criticize.

He poked through the pantry, and nodded. That'd do. He had no idea why Jack had traded for shellfish, but a good lobster bisque would use it up. And the best part, Aster wouldn't have to eat any of it.

He prepped his own meal, a quick chicken salad, and set it aside in the cool room to chill while he prepared Jack's dinner. Before long, the strangely appetizing smell was filling the house. His mouth watered, but he knew the first sip would taste like a dumpster, and the second would be worse.

Jack seemed to like seafood, though. Even laverbread, which tasted overly metallic to Aster. Certainly, just as the bisque was finishing up, Jack emerged from his room like an underweight bear from its den, sniffing the air and looking grumpy with everything.

"Grub's up," Aster said, with a care for Jack's headache. He got a glower and a grunt for his troubles, but better than whimpering in pain.

Jack brightened at the sight of the lobster bisque, and then shot Aster a look that nearly sent the Pooka off in a fit of giggles. The suspicious, possessive ire was matched by a befuddled pout and a case of bedhead that left Jack looking a little electrified.

"All yours, mate. Got myself a salad. You know I don't like the taste of shellfish."

Jack stopped glaring, and nodded. "Yeah. Weird." He paused, and eyed the pot. "Eat now?"

"Yes, Jack," he said, feeling strangely fond. Or not so strangely; this was a rare state for Jack, and the novelty value alone... "Eat now. Sit. I'll serve."

Jack almost face-planted into the bowl when Aster set it in front of them. They ate in silence, Aster finishing long before Jack, who went back for seconds, and then scraped up the last of the bisque for
half a bowl's worth. Aster took the bowl away when Jack looked at the sink, and did the washing while the winter spirit sat at the table looking disgruntled.

"If you think I'm letting you wash anything in your state, you've another thing coming." Aster left the pot in the drying rack, and put the dishes away in the cupboard. "C'mon, let's get you somewhere more comfortable."

Jack squinted up at him. "Not the sitting room," he said. "Fire's too loud."

"You want to go back to sleep?" Aster helped the slight winter spirit stand up, and held him close. Jack seemed happy enough to lean against Aster's chest, certainly happier to cuddle than be awake. And naked. What did it say, he wondered, that he hadn't noticed until this second?

"Jack? Where's your dags?"

"Huh?" Jack looked up at him, and wrinkled his nose. "What?"

"Your dags. Trousers." Oh bloody hell, Jack was naked. Things were dangling that should, at least, not be visible. Especially right now, when Jack's mental and emotional defenses were low. The last thing he needed was for the metaphorical armour of clothes to be, well… missing as well.

Though with his luck, Jack wouldn't give a fig, and Aster would be stuck keeping an eye out for sharp things and fire sparks and who knew what else, the sort of things clothes protected the flesh from. And Aster would be stuck looking at things dangling, which was just a highly impractical biological statement right there.

"You're glaring. Why?"

"You're dangling. Why?"

Jack looked down at himself, and after a minute and a half - Aster counted the seconds - started laughing. "Really?" he asked, and shifted to better lean against Aster's chest. "You goof."

"Oy! You should be feeling the cold by now. C'mon, mate. How about we go to my studio. You can curl up in the chair." Under as many blankets as Aster could get his hands on. Which was, quite honestly, quite a few at this point.

Jack grumbled, and being the little shit he was, tossed most of the blankets off onto the floor. Aster left him alone; he was in the egg-shaped chair, with a kiddie blanket he'd picked up some Easter, curled up under puffy white clouds and bright blue bunnies, drowsing and beginning to make whuffling snore-sounds.

It was adorable. And, Aster realized, just too tempting.

He got a pad of stiffened, black paper, and a box of chalk, and set to work.

Three days after Jack’s recovery from the hangover, and Aster was ready to pull his fur out at the roots. There was less than a month left before General Winter’s party, and Jack wasn’t planning anything. He didn’t even have any fancy clothes!

"Clothes I didn’t have to make myself are fancy," he’d said, and then gestured at himself. "Oh, look, clothes I didn’t have to make myself! Imagine that!"

It was frustrating.
When Aster suggested he go with Jack to the party, the winter spirit had laughed until he fell over. Aster didn’t suggest it again.

Which was why, he thought, it was such a shock to be ambushed and hustled off to the sauna. With Jack babbling, of all things, about a ‘quick talk with the Snow Queen’.

"What?" he managed, just before Jack shoved him into the washroom.

"You’re covered in sand, what were you doing?" Jack brushed at Aster’s shoulders, and then yanked the sauna door open. "Rolling in it? Get in."

"What?" he asked, again. Jack rolled his eyes and shoved.

"You can’t come with me to tea looking like that," he said. "Snow Queen disapproves of dirt."

What, he asked, a third time - this time internally. Snow Queen? Tea with that hag? Him? And - had Jack gotten into the coffee again?

He was yanked out minutes later, and forced down onto a stool. Jack had a brush in one hand, a comb in the other, and a demented gleam in his eyes.

"There’s no," Aster began, and then Jack attacked.

He managed to pull the brush away, and knocked the comb out of Jack’s hands. "Careful," he snapped. "That hurts."

"And we’re going to be so late, because you went to the beach!" Jack shifted, arms akimbo, and glared. "You’re the one who was freaked out about General Winter’s party!"

Aster yanked the brush over his arm, and scowled. "I was visiting the Sahara." Jack looked exasperated, so he supposed it didn’t really matter to a winter spirit. "And since when have we been going to tea with her?"

"Since -" Jack paused, and then cleared his throat. "Her letter arrived after you’d already left," he admitted, cheeks flushing a light pink. "Which completely slipped my mind as it got later… Um, how about I get you something to wrap up in for the visit?"

"Why would I go, anyways?" The Snow Queen took great delight in living up in the Arctic Circle, further north than the workshop, even. Supposedly even her servants were made out of snow, but Aster wasn’t going to go up there and find out. Too cold.

"Again, you’re the one who worried about General Winter’s party. Even if I think it’s a bad idea for you to go, Snow Queen says it should be fine." Jack wrinkled his nose. "But she wants to talk to you first. Apparently the last time winter spirits mingled with spring, Persephone got kidnapped?"

"Bit more complicated than that, mate," Aster said, and shooed him out of the washroom.

He disapproved of the speed they rushed out the door, but according to Jack tea was scheduled for sunset, Burgess Time… and they were cutting it close. Aster wrapped the Russian greatcoat tighter around his shoulders, and watched Jack twist the magic on the gate.

They stepped out onto a windswept plain of snow and ice, the sun overhead blindingly bright. Aster squinted, and held up one hand until his eyes adapted; a mostly painless bit of instinctive shapeshifting. If he looked in the mirror, his eyes would be masked with dark gray fur, like a raccoon, and his pupils would be narrowed into vertical slits.
Trying to do so on purpose always ended with giving himself a raccoon head, and he'd never been able to change his eyes voluntarily; he'd only seen the result once, back when he'd lived in Mu. It was a pity, the darker fur was rather distinguished.

"Wow," Jack said, turning and peering up at Aster's face. The winter spirit seemed unbothered by the light, quite probably a side effect of his elemental alignment. "That's really neat. Can you give yourself tiger stripes too?"

Aster grinned, and shrugged. "Sometimes? Not in… Strewth, yonks. Now, where are we?"

"Close to her… doorway, I guess. Look for a frozen forest, that'll be the marker."

A forest? Up here? Aster looked around, and then gestured at the snow. "Jack, its summer."

"A frozen forest… believe me, you can't mistake it for anything else." Jack pointed ahead and a little to his side. "Should be that way, I don't like getting too close… She changes the landscape, sometimes." And, because that wasn't ominous at all, Jack strode forwards, barefoot and having no trouble with the ice.

Aster, in his boots, immediately slipped and nearly fell. Jack, moving faster than anyone with sense would have, dashed over the snow and caught him before he'd done more than totter.

"Why don't I help you?" Jack suggested, shifting until he was tucked under Aster's arm.

"Yeah," he agreed, his grip tight. "Why don't you?"

They minced their way across the ice, Aster moving with exaggerated care. Boots. Granted, he did like avoiding numb feet and frost-bitten footpads, but he didn't much like the difficulty he had in feeling the ground. He kept tripping, of all things.

Jack led him up a steep ridge, half-carrying the Pooka most of the way, and once at the top they stopped to take in the view.

"Oh," Aster said, and gestured at the valley below. "That's what you meant."

"Yeah." Jack lifted his staff, blue sparkles dancing around the crook. "Means we're at the door. I just knocked."

Chapter End Notes

The Thing with Persephone may or may not be brought up - it's kind of a fun little idea that has me giggling, but I'm not a big fan of "as you know" stuff, where both characters know the information but they're telling each other about it anyways so we the readers (and the writer) can be told, too. Depending on how General Winter's party goes, it'll either be talked about there, or in an author's note at some point.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Last time...

Jack led him up a steep ridge, half-carrying the Pooka most of the way, and once at the top they stopped to take in the view.
"Oh," Aster said, and gestured at the valley below. "That's what you meant."
"Yeah." Jack lifted his staff, blue sparkles dancing around the crook. "Means we're at the door, I just knocked."

Aster nodded, only a scrap of attention directed towards Jack. The rest was focused on the frozen forest spread out and glittering in the sunlight. Frozen was certainly the word for it; the trees were crafted out of ice and snow, as were the bushes, the vines, the ferns and the grass. There were snow-flowers with carefully tinted petals, and there were boulders of ice with delicate frost-ferns growing on them in lieu of moss. The tree branches swayed and bent in a wind Aster couldn't feel, and the leaves rustled with quiet chimes, like expensive crystal glasses. The sunlight hit the ice, and was reflected back in a dazzling spray of rainbow colours.

"I know," Jack said, and squeezed Aster's waist. "It's impressive."

"Can you do this?" he asked, and looked down just in time to see Jack smooth away a strange expression.

"But where would I put it?" Jack protested. "The trees would melt in the summer."

Movement in the valley below cut off any response Aster could have made, and he turned to watch. In short order the movement came clear, and he raised his eyebrows at the four snow-white elk, drawing an ornate sleigh over the snow-grass. While there was a woman in the sleigh, she wasn't holding the reins; no one was, they were tied to the front of the sleigh and hung loose from the elks' bridles.

"There's our ride," Jack said, and nudged Aster with his hip when the Pooka didn't immediately move. "C'mon, cottontail."

Once more, Jack had to practically carry Aster, this time down the slope instead of up. Halfway down, the snow seemed to shimmy, and formed into a staircase, with them at the top. Jack paused and squinted at it, mouth pinched and twisted to one side. Aster settled for feeling relieved; he could be suspicious later.

The sleigh came to a stop at the base of the stairs, just as they finished walking down. Aster looked from the young woman, who at once looked attractive and less emotional than a marble statue, and Jack.

Finally, the woman tilted her head at the second bench, behind her and a bit higher than the one she
was using. "Welcome to my lady the Snow Queen's domain, Jack Frost and Easter Bunny. Allow me to convey you to her residence."

Aster looked back down at Jack, who continued staring at the woman. Finally, Jack nodded, and gestured Aster in first. "Sure thing," he said, climbing into the sleigh. He rummaged under the bench, and pulled out a fur; it looked like deer hide of some kind, but of a deer the size of a polar bear. Or bigger. Jack spread it over both of their laps, and Aster felt immediately warmer. Not that he'd been freezing cold, exactly, but certainly chilled.

The elk began moving, pulling the sleigh with seemingly little effort. The snow-grass flattened beneath the runners with a peculiar crunching sound, and when Aster looked behind them, it was slowly springing back in the manner of real grass. Overhead, the ice-branches swayed, and this close he could hear the dull crunch of ice grinding against ice, under the delicate chime of the leaves. It was beautiful to look at, but rather eerie to move through. If Jack hadn't been there, and if it hadn't been about General Winter's party, Aster would have first jumped out of his skin and then bolted for home with all speed.

"Our escort here is one of the Snow Maiden," Jack said, suddenly enough that Aster twitched. "Sorry. She's the full-spirit version, that's why she's got less emotional depth than a rock."

"Jack!" She was sitting right there.

"She doesn’t care. The mortal part of her's gone and dust." Jack tilted his head, and gestured to the woman. "Unless I'm wrong, there?"

The woman could have been a mannequin, dressed in fancy clothes. "There is nothing to care. It is true."

"Snow Maidens are enchanted ice given a mortal spirit, usually. Sometimes they're ghosts of women who died due to suicide over a guy, but mostly they're ice. Once the spirit goes bye-bye…" Jack waved his hand in a mocking goodbye, "only the ice is left. Snow Queen collects them, says it spares her having to deal with emotional stupidity."

Aster gawped at Jack. The sheer callousness of his remark - who said these snow maidens felt nothing? Who could even say they'd lost their mortal spirits? Souls weren't measurable. Maybe the poor things just stopped emoting because people kept treating them like automations! And Jack, of all people, buying into it - he didn't want to believe it, but here Jack was, talking about the Snow Maiden as if she had less awareness than a - than a car.

"Oh, stop looking at me like that," Jack snapped. "You're no more freaked out than I was when I found out. And you'll do what I did, and try to treat them like people, and I promise not to say I told you so when you figure out I'm right."

Aster stared at Jack in horror. Jack was saying these things. To quote the latest crop of kids, it did not compute.

He looked away, and blinked. The conversation had distracted him, but the sleigh was moving through the frozen forest at a generous clip. The trees weren't whipping by like when he ran, but few things on this planet came close to his speeds. The forest appeared to be pulling away, though obviously they were just moving out of it. Ahead, the trees made way for a quintessential village, surrounded by fields marked out with fieldstone and split-rail fences.

Everything, from the stones to the rails, from the crops in the field to the gravel path the sleigh transferred to, was made out of snow and ice. The crops moved less than the trees did, and weren't
detailed enough for him to tell if they were supposed to represent anything in particular. The houses didn't seem to be any one design, and were formed out of carved and textured snow blocks. There were a few people, women that were probably Snow Maidens, and they stood in the doorways watching as the sleigh glided past.

Once they left the village, they went through a stretch of fields, which changed abruptly from the snow and ice creations, to actual fields. There was rich earth, steaming faintly, covered in heaps and mounds of greenery. There were turnips and potato plants, and other things he couldn't identify from the sleigh, but practically glowing with health. A cat, good sized and a sleek, seal-brown, slid out from under a mound of what was probably rhubarb, hissed at the sleigh, and vanished back under the leaves.

As for the village itself… It was bustling. The buildings were dusted lightly with snow, but were made out of wood, covered in stucco, covered further in carved beams and planks making each house - otherwise mostly identical, being a bunch of A-frames differing only in size and whether there was a squat tower attached to the front or the back - individual and colourful. The ice village had only generic houses, and this village had what looked to be shops, homes, a government-type building with two large, squat towers and pots of bright flowers hanging from the roof, and other buildings Aster was unable to see properly from the sleigh. There was a clock tower. Climbing, flowering vines climbed and flowered over the buildings. Down one side lane children played catch with an enthusiastic dog gambo ling between them. Down another, what looked like the children's mothers gossiped beside a fountain.

The contrast between the two villages couldn't have been more obvious, and the vibrancy of the people made the placid Snow Maiden go from pitiful to creepy. Not, Aster assured himself, that there was anything to Jack's claims. It was only that, well, the disturbing level of restraint made his fur crawl.

"The Hulder live here," Jack said, and waved one hand at the village. "Well, one group of them. The women are Hulder or Huldra, and the men are Huldrekal." "They have tails," Aster realized, as a cluster of boys charged past. Cow tails… maybe.

"Yeah, that's the Hulder. They're forest spirits." Jack pointed ahead of them, and Aster's eyes widened.

The castle loomed over its surroundings, and blended into them. The ice reflected the blue of the sky and the soft hues of the snowfield, so that it appeared somewhat translucent and hard to focus on. It was big enough to rival homes of state and tall enough to challenge high rise buildings.

"Here we are," Jack said, sounding sardonic. "The Snow Queen's castle."

Aster twitched an ear, finally able to put his finger on what about Jack was bothering him.

Sardonic. Jack had never, in his experience, sounded like that when they'd talked, even when their relationship hadn't been the best. But right now, he'd been callous and now scornful. What next? Snide? Spiteful? Was it the presence of other winter spirits, or something else?

He didn't know. But he didn't like it.

Walking through the ice palace was an… interesting experience, in the old Chinese curse sort of way. The light was strange, filtering through the semi-translucent walls, and while the floor was smooth and level, it didn't look like it, and Aster tripped three times in as many minutes. Everything
was shaded in blue, which… Blue wasn't a bad colour, especially on, say, Jack… but due do the way the light filtered through the ice, and the shading, and the way the floor appeared to ripple, it felt almost like they were moving around underwater.

His body kept trying to shift for breathing liquid, and then being surprised by air. If this didn't sort itself out soon, he'd start hiccupping.

Their guide, the Snow Maiden, finally took them outside… and onto a balcony. Aster looked back down the hallway. They'd entered at ground level, and walked straight - and didn't go up any stairs or ramps - and now they were on a balcony halfway up the castle.

"You know," he murmured to Jack, "I don't mind magic. I just like knowing a spell's going to be put on me before it happens."

Jack smirked. "Well, I'd hope you didn't mind magic. Being, you know, a creature of magic yourself."

"Please be seated," the Snow Maiden said, and gestured at a baroque-looking patio table and chairs. The tabletop seemed to be glass… or, considering the domain ruler, especially clear and smooth ice. The chairs looked to be made out of a silvery metal, without a single cushion to soften the seats.

Jack pulled one of the chairs out for Aster, and sat down beside him. It left two other seats open, the ones closest to the edge of the balcony and the railing that barely reached Jack's ankle.

They didn't have to wait long; though, as long as Aster remained sitting, the view wasn't bad. He was looking out over the distant, frozen forest, when he heard quiet footsteps approaching the balcony. He turned to look - his back wasn't exactly to the door, but it wasn't exactly not - and raised his eyebrows. The approaching person was presumably female - wearing a dress, at least - but looked barely human… and barely alive.

They were unusually tall for a human, nearly seven feet tall even before the stylish mound of hair added on another six inches. Their skin was a dull, off-white shade he normally associated with fish bellies and freezing victims. They were nearly skeletal, only enough flesh to keep the bones from showing through clearly, and despite that their face was fleshy and full, almost beautiful. Androgynous, with high cheekbones and a sharp jaw line, and subtle makeup to highlight the eyes. Those eyes were the only thing about the person that looked alive, a brilliant silver-blue that blazed with some barely restrained emotion. It made Aster uncomfortable to see it.

"Snow Queen," Jack said, and stood up. "Nice dress."

Dress? Aster looked, and blinked. It was a nice dress, he supposed, taking the skeletal body into account, but it was utterly invisible when paired with those eyes and that air of intense emotion.

"Jack Frost. And guest." For one long, worrying moment, the Snow Queen's gaze rested on Aster. He started breathing again when she looked over at Jack again. "How good of you to join me."

"How could we possibly refuse?" Jack stepped around the table and pulled out a chair for… her, Aster supposed. Though, dress aside, the Snow Queen didn't have any of the female secondary characteristics, at least not without counting her ribs and inspecting the size and shape of her pelvis.

Well, Queen and dress… he supposed female pronouns were the polite option.

The Snow Queen sat down, and smiled at them. Aster found himself scrutinizing her expression, such as it was, it was so faint. "It is so lovely to get guests. I get them so rarely."
"Might be your habit of turning people into ice statues," Jack said, in a musing tone. "Y'know. Might be a factor."

Aster shot an appalled look at Jack, and turned back to the Snow Queen. Whose smile had, if anything, grown.

"Perhaps it is. Yet they make such lovely decorations, don't you think? Such a lively fillip to the gardens." She looked over at Aster again, and tilted her head ever so slightly to the side. "And what are your thoughts on it, my guest? Jack Frost has made his opinions delightfully clear."

Aster cleared his throat, buying a few seconds. The expression that had flitted, there and gone, over her face when mentioning Jack's opinions on her turning people into statues… Being here was a bad idea. Could he reverse a statue spell? He didn't think she'd be able to do anything to him, but Jack?

"Can't say I'm over-fond of it. Gardens should be able to stand on their own, in my opinion."

For three, rapid heart-beats, the Snow Queen stared at him, utterly expressionless. And then she smiled. "What an interesting view on it. I don't believe anyone has ever expressed that opinion to me before."

Jack drummed his fingers on the table. "Since we're not turning into statues anytime soon…" He leaned forward, his body language unusually aggressive. His shoulders were square. Aster hadn't realized Jack even knew how to square his shoulders. "What's the tea invite for?"

"Why, Jack Frost." The Snow Queen's smile widened, becoming surprisingly toothy. "I thought you would appreciate a lesson in manners for you and your guest."

Jack tilted his head, and grinned back. Or at least showed his teeth. "Never had to worry about that before," he said, and glanced at Aster. Then he shrugged. "You people know to suck it up and accept whatever I dish out."

Wait, what?

The Snow Queen narrowed her eyes, and light the same shade as her eyes began to dance and sparkle around her fingertips. Jack pressed the tip of his forefinger to the tabletop, and frost spread from the contact.

"You have never brought a creature of spring to one of our gatherings," the Snow Queen said. She dismissed her magic, and Jack let his frost fade. "Persephone's courtship disrupted events for decades. Your guest is even older and far more beloved, it is important to prevent any… upheaval."

"What?" Aster said, blinking. Beloved? Since when? He never talked to people, especially not spring spirits.

Jack reached over and wrapped his hand around the back of Aster's neck. "Someone tries any upheaval, I'll deal with them," he growled, his grip gentle.

Aster just blinked at the two of them. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he finally said.

The Snow Queen stared at him. "Charming." She looked back at Jack. "You can see why I asked you to tea."

"Considering Bunny will be there as my guest, no, I really can't."

Was this some kind of winter spirit possessiveness? Aster half-listened to a few more verbal back-
and-forths, the Snow Queen rephrasing how important the tea was, and Jack growling about how Aster was his guest. This was some kind of political, he supposed, and they were using him as a way to... what, jockey for power?

"So he will need clothes," the Snow Queen said, radiating faint satisfaction. Her face was so lacking in mobility, and so... fleshy compared to the rest of her... maybe it was that human face stuff. Botulin? Botox, that was it.

Jack squeezed the back of Aster's neck, though 'squeeze' implied a harder grip than Jack used. "Bunny, you've got clothes, right? Something nice?"

"I reckon." Everything was rather old and ready to fall apart, but he'd been a dab hand with a needle once upon a time... and failing his own efforts, he supposed he could always ask North's elves for a favour or two. The elves were better than everyone when it came to sewing, it was part of their nature.

Mind, there was only three days left before the party. He'd have to try to make the clothes himself when they got back today, and tell the elves by tomorrow latest if he was going to get anything more than the basics out of them.

"There, he has clothes," Jack said, squeezing Aster's neck again.

The Snow Queen stared at him, and then turned her gaze on Aster. "I am willing to provide you garments," she said. "It would be a pleasure."

Aster realized, suddenly, why she was making him so uneasy. It was that expression. There was something faintly predatory about it, about her, the way she moved as little as possible. It wasn't even snake-like; more like a praying mantis, or a spider watching a fly bumble into its web.

Well, he was no kind of prey; he was a Pookan warrior, even if he was out of shape and a bit undisciplined. He'd have to work on that, but for the moment, he was more than equal to one skeletal winter spirit. "I appreciate the thought," he said, his thoughts touching, briefly, on the proper way to talk to one of the Fae. The same rules might apply in this situation, and if they didn't, it never hurt to be careful. "But no, I can manage on my own. Or with Jack's help, should I need it."

More like Jack needed his help. He'd left making Jack an outfit a bit late, too... stupid of him, really.

He really needed to work on that warrior's discipline.

The Snow Queen tilted her head in acknowledgment of something, the prey escaping maybe, and settled back in her chair. "Tea," she said. "We will work on your manners while we partake."


Chapter End Notes

Who here is worried about how Jack's acting in the Snow Queen's domain?

... Bunny, put your hands down, you don't get to express an opinion outside of the story.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jack slumped back against the front door, and looked up at Bunny. "Sorry about that," he said, a wave of exhaustion turning his bones to lead and muscles to warm wax. "I didn't think she'd be so… determined."

He wasn't even sure what she'd been so determined about, only that she'd wanted Bunny to get clothes from her. It was probably a status thing, but his experience with winter spirit politics was mostly blundering through them and being excused because he was 'the frost', whatever that meant.

Bunny shot him a look, a new and completely unreadable expression on his face. "You realize I have to make us both clothes, now?"

"What?" Jack shoved off the door, and staggered over to a chair. "Why?"

"So we match." Bunny added a few sticks of wood to the fire, and slumped down in his own seat. "After that, I want it to be very clear I'm with you."

"They're going to be so weird," Jack said, after a minute. "Yeah, sure, matching clothes. Whatever you need."

Aster stretched his feet out in front of the fire, and flexed his toes. "What I need… Right now, I reckon I need some tucker and then a measuring tape."

He thought about it. "I can probably manage the food," he said. "Can't help you with the tape."

"That's fine, I can borrow one from the elves."

Elves?

Jack shook his head and, after a few minutes, shoved up out of the chair and made his way into the kitchen. There was half a loaf of bread, a wedge of cheese, and the first of the season's grapes. That'd do for dinner, he supposed; after dealing with Snow Queen and her domain, Jack wasn't very hungry and he'd be surprised if Bunny had much of an appetite either.

On the other hand, he thought a few minutes later, this was Bunny, who ate three times as much food as Jack did. The winter spirit was happy enough with two slices of bread and some cheese, while Bunny demolished the rest of the loaf and the cheese. It was a good thing he'd brought out the grapes, because Bunny still looked hungry when the last of the cheese vanished into his gullet.

"That should hold me," Bunny said. He cracked his neck, and stood up. "Lemme grab my sketchbook and then we can swing by North's, take your measurements."

"Oh, North's elves." Jack nodded. "Yeah, sure."

"What elves did you think I meant?"

Jack wasn't sure. He followed Bunny through the tunnels, but he couldn't remember the trip. Normally he enjoyed it, racing Bunny, skating along on a layer of frost thin enough not to harm the moss and ferns, the wind whistling around the curves and corners.
Tonight, though, he just felt tired.

He waved the worst of the wind away from Bunny when they stepped out into the snow. Bunny had left his greatcoat and boots back home, and he immediately cursed at the cold. Jack smiled, but the funny seemed to be missing.

The yeti hustled them inside, and one of the smaller, presumably younger ones ushered them to a sitting room. Jack slumped down on the couch, and closed his eyes. He had no idea if this was a room they'd ever used before, and didn't care. The couch was comfortable, that was really all that mattered.

"Jack?" Bunny's hand pressed against his forehead, blazing warm. "Are you alright?"

"Tired," he managed. It'd been a long day.

Bunny didn't reply, but he left his hand in place.

It didn't feel like any time passed before North arrived, the noise crashing over Jack like a violent wave. He cracked one eye open when North shook his shoulders, and grunted.

"Ah, good, you can wake," North said. "Jack, is this Snow Queen's doing?"

Huh? "Tired," he said, and closed his eye again. He didn't figure the Snow Queen had made him tired. Maybe her domain. Hulder aside, it was a cheerless place. He always got a little wiped out after visiting her.

He maybe drifted off a bit after that, sort of. He was aware, distantly, of being picked up and carried, but he couldn't be bothered to pay attention. He smelt tobacco and peppermint, wool, and cookies. And then he was put down on a bed with crackly sheets, which scratched his exposed skin. Hands, burning hot, pressed against his forehead and cheeks, pressed against his chest and his sweater was no protection.

His mind was stuffed with cotton, or maybe static; he was aware, almost painfully, of the brush of his sweater over his skin, the crackly sheets. He burned and he froze, and then he drifted.

Jack drifted awake in a way he rarely did, awareness coming back in stages. First, he was warm; then he was warm and lying on something soft, wrapped in something softer. An arm, heavy and radiating heat, was draped over his stomach. Gentle breaths, smelling like stale chocolate and spearmint, fluttered against his cheek. He heard the breathing, the not-so-quiet drone of a building that never quite went to sleep.

He felt… better. Still a little tired, but it didn't drag at him, pull him down. He didn't want to move, didn't need to, except he felt a little stiff. He rolled, turning into Bunny, who was reassuringly solid and warm. Jack wrapped his arm over Bunny's waist, pressed his face into the soft, white fur at the base of Bunny's throat, and started to drift off again.

Except Bunny woke up. He felt it, the hitch in Bunny's breathing and the way Bunny's arm twitched. Jack grunted, and curled up a little more, ankles hooked around Bunny's knee.

"Jack?" Bunny whispered.

"What?" If he sounded grumpy enough, maybe Bunny would let him go back to sleep…

"You're awake. Feeling better?" Soft fur brushed against his ear, and Bunny kept shifting. Jack supposed the Pooka was looking him over, but really. That was bad pillow behaviour, moving
around like that.

Still... Bunny deserved an answer. "Yeah," Jack said, and rolled onto his back. If Bunny wasn't going to hold still, he might as well use an actual pillow. He opened his eyes, the better to stare at the ceiling, and decided against telling Bunny how sensitive his skin had been.

Bunny shifted, and the blankets went slack over Jack's body. Speaking of sensitive skin... "Bunny," Jack said. "Why am I naked at North's?"

Bunny pressed his nose against Jack's shoulder, and smirked. "Well, mate, you were freezing cold. Best thing for hypothermia, strip down and cuddle up."

"Yeah, I know. But, winter spirit, cold won't hurt me."

"No," North said, and managed to scare a few decades off of him. If his white hair turned gray, he was dying North's beard pink. Thankfully the Russian maniac was in the doorway, not the bed. He looked like he'd just gotten good news when he'd been expecting bad. "But cold can make winter spirit sleep for too long. Snow Queen almost managed a mischief on you."

"Bull," Jack said. But yeah, she probably had. "Damn it. Remind me to smack her when we're at the party, Fluffy."

Wait, how long had he slept? Jack bolted up, making North jump and Bunny flail a little. "What day is it?"

"Day after tea with the Snow Queen," Bunny said. He sat up, and rubbed at a patch of bedhead on one shoulder. "Lucky you, the elves are making our clothes."

Clothes? Clothes, right. Jack looked down at himself, and shrugged. He remembered the scratchy sheets burning as they scraped over his skin, but he wasn't marked up. And his clothes were folded up on a chair. He got out of bed, ignored North's yelp, and pulled his pants on.

"I'd have figured you'd insist on staying home," he told Bunny. Or try to insist Jack stay home, but hah, no.


"Would you, if I did?" Bunny asked, his ears tilting forward.

"No, but it'd be tempting." He scrubbed a hand back through his hair, and stretched. "Have to go, though, considering how rude the Snow Queen was."

He ignored North, repeating the word 'rude' incredulously. "I don't understand all the politics, but she just stomped all over good manners, Bunny, I can't let that stand."

Bunny sighed, and got out of bed. "Alright. Well, the elves have been working all night, reckon we should go see what progress they've made. I gave them the clothing designs around midnight."

Jack raised his eyebrows, and looked at North. "The elves are that fast?"

"Faster," he said, and waved them through the door.

It had to be very early or very late, Workshop time, because only a skeleton shift was on duty, watching over the lines of toys. Jack looked around, the rooms suddenly cavernous and echoing, instead of seeming too crowded to breathe. The handful of yeti stuck on duty clutched mugs the size
of Jack's head, filled to the brim with coffee. They yawned and grunted to each other, and were too busy trying to look awake for North to glare at Jack.

It was almost a relief to move back into the residential part of the Workshop, though not a section meant for human-sized people. And the rooms were a bit odd, until Jack's brain adjusted a bit. Of course the elves would have walkways up along the walls and under the roof; they were barely a foot tall with their hats, they needed shorter ceilings or more stuff to fill the empty spaces.

"Here we are, stitching room," North said, and let them into a room that was mostly missing the hamster trails that had otherwise filled this section. It looked like a professional fashion artist's place, with dress-dummies everywhere, bolts of fabric stacked and racked along the walls, reels of ribbons and heaps of lace and other stuff Jack didn't recognize piled on the tables, of which there were many, in varying heights, apparently depending on what they were used for. Intimidating machines hulked in one back corner, while over by the windows were a host of sewing machines and elf-sized chairs for hand-embroidery.

Most of the dress-dummies were North shaped. Jack had to stifle a smirk, but at least it was a nice change from the 'no internal organs' shape most dress-dummies had.

There were four dummies, though, that weren't North-shaped, but were familiar. One short one was clearly Sandy, while the tallest-and-narrowest one was Bunny. It took a minute to figure out which of the remaining two dummies were for Tooth and which for Jack - the clothes draped over the Jack-shaped dummy helped - and he made a mental note to bulk up somehow. Or maybe lose weight… was it sad that Tooth seemed to have bigger biceps than he did?

She definitely had broader shoulders.

North snickered when Jack voiced his observation. "Well, she is warrior queen of India. All that sword swinging."

"All of India?" Bunny moved over to the Jack-dummy, and studied the clothes. "Thought it was just her ancestral corner?"

"Ah, some sort of vote was held two centuries ago," North said, and waved one hand in dismissal. "Apparently trouncing every invading army makes you victor over all India, even if you never put one foot past your borders."

"Is Tooth going to be wearing clothes to the party?" Jack asked. The Tooth-dummy was bare of any costume, looking a bit forlorn. "How would that even work with her feathers?"

"Very light fabrics," Bunny said absently. "Gauze, mostly. Otherwise she'd overheat."

"And fortunately, saris are supposed to be loose on the body," North added. "She is using one from the last big gathering. Don't think you were spirit then… seventeen-twenty-five?"

"I was, but only just…" What happened in 1725? Catherine the first became Empress of Russia, a whole bunch of people died, Native American and white folk relations took a nose dive… Treaty of Vienna, would that be something spirits would gather about? Treaty of Hanover, maybe…

He shook it off, and smiled at North. "I became a spirit early in seventeen-twelve." Died. He'd died on the first day of spring in 1712. Just because death hadn't stuck didn't mean it hadn't happened. "Didn't really meet anyone until the thirties, which was about the same time…" About the same time certain spirit guide family members had managed to track him down, explain things, and then arrange for the very few lessons in magic he'd needed. "About the same time I started creating my own
domain, once I realized it was possible."

"So young," North said, and clapped Jack on the shoulder. "Well, Bunny, what do you think?"

"I think they barely started," Bunny grumbled, and gestured at the Bunny-dummy. "They started on mine first?"

"Materials for you are even easier," North confirmed. He looked down at Jack. "Same problem as Tooth has - only fur instead of feathers. So, gauze."

"Sometimes," Bunny muttered. He lifted a sleeve, and let it fall. "Silk?"

"Jack will not need to worry about being chilled."

Jack rolled his eyes, and moved over to the dummy. "I like the blue," he decided, even if it was currently a mostly-shapeless smock. "When will it be done, you think?"

"Tomorrow morning?" North shrugged. "Midday at very latest. Are you going to stay for breakfast?"

Breakfast? "What's on offer?"

Bunny left the outfit alone, and headed for the door. "It's Santa's Workshop, Frostbite," he said. "There's everything you could ever want."

Oh. *Pancakes*. Jack hurried after Bunny.

Chapter End Notes

Oh look this absolutely doesn't deal with their fight earlier, still! But other things are explained. Sort of. Right?

... Right?
Chapter 22

Aster glanced over at Jack, and away before the winter spirit could notice his attention. Jack was focused on his knitting, nothing at all like the sardonic doppelganger from yesterday. His eyes were bright, his smile gentle.

"Keep that up," Jack said, "and I'm going to start suspecting something. What's wrong, Bun?"

Aster flattened his ears. "Nothing." And with that tone of voice, he all but confirmed something was wrong. Lovely. He glanced at Jack again, and winced at the smirk.

"Yeah. You're kinda no good at that, Fluffy. Honestly. If it's about the hypothermia -"

"No. Well, yes, that too, but no, not that." He took a deep breath. "It's how you acted. Moment we stepped into the Snow Queen's domain, you were… you were almost cruel. And the way you treated the Snow Maiden! I - Jack, you… weren't you."

"Not… me?" Jack didn't do anything different, he kept knitting, but suddenly he was like he'd been in the Snow Queen's domain. He lounged in the chair instead of sprawling in it, his smile was nasty and small, and he seemed to be judging Aster, and finding him wanting.

"Oh, Bunny," Jack said, and laughed. There was no kindness in the sound. "You have no idea."

And then Jack was himself again, relaxed and comfortable, his smile softening to something rueful, almost sheepish. "I dunno how I do it, but, uh, winter spirit. And they… I don't know how to explain it."

Aster let go of the chair arm, and looked away. "Try," he suggested.

"It… Y'know how strong magic auras… um. I have never put this into words before." The knitting needles clicked against the table, and Jack blew out his breath. "Right. So, uh, how I sense magic, it's a bit like sunlight. Sometimes it's weak and not very warm, other times it's like a blow to every bit of exposed skin, right? Only it's not something you can really weigh - I know those scientists spent thirty years and said you can, but I've got my doubts."

Aster snorted. "They were off, but don't wander from the subject."

"Most of the time," Jack said, sounding thoughtful, "I can't really feel other people's magic. For the most part, I don't get any more of a sunlight-blow than I would around a human. But sometimes, especially when entering another spirit's domain, there's that… that blow. And my own magic moves forward to, I don't know, respond? It's not an attack, I don't think, maybe it's, like, keeping the other person's magic from touching my skin. But yeah, uh, when my magic does its flair-thing I get more winter spirit-y?"

Aster stared into the fire, and hummed as he thought. "Does that do anything to your personality?" he asked.

"Not that I've noticed?" Jack cleared his throat. "I mean, I don't think I do anything different - just now, I didn't change how I was sitting or anything, but you looked freaked out."
Which meant it was more how he'd been perceiving Jack changing, than anything Jack had done. That wasn't ideal, but it was better than Jack pulling a Jekyll and Hyde. He peeked at the winter spirit in question, who was watching him with a worried expression.

"You went from being my friend to… to someone cruel," he explained. "And meeting the Snow Queen. That was more of the same."

Jack wrinkled his nose, and nodded. "Gotcha. I don't really like her domain. But really, I'm serious. The Snow Maidens, I mean. I'll have to introduce you to a live one, it's… it's like the difference between a flower and a carving of one. And if the Snow Queen didn't swoop down and abduct them just before, when they died they'd crumble away to snow. Like that Jotun did," he added. "Seems to be a winter spirit thing… huh."

"But the way you talked about it in front of her," Aster said, looking down at his hands. "I know you say the Snow Maidens can't be hurt that way, but… it was rude, Jack." The first bit of ill-manners he'd seen in… well. Quite a while. Even before moving in with the bloke, Jack hadn't been rude.

"It… was?"

Aster looked up. Jack looked confused. "Yeah, it was."

"But everyone else…?" Now it was Jack's turn to stare into the fire. "Huh. Well. Uh, I'll try to do better, then."

He relaxed, and smiled. "I'd appreciate that, Frostbite. Even if the Snow Maidens don't feel emotion, doesn't mean they can't get insulted anyways, right?"

"I suppose," Jack said, sounding dubious. That was alright. They'd just talk about it again, later, when Jack had had a chance to think about it. Emotions weren't the only way to judge life, after all - but that wasn't something he was going to dwell on for the moment.

"So tomorrow's the grand party. I - are you going to be, uh, very winter spirit, then?"

Jack shrugged. "Probably? I honestly don't notice this stuff, Bunny, I have no clue. I'll try not to be?"

Aster shook his head, and stood up. "No worries, mate, now that I know what's going on. Maybe it's my spring powers reacting to your winter ones."

Or maybe, he thought, as he got ready for bed, it was his lack of spring powers protecting him from Jack's winter powers. He'd had magic, once, though it'd waned over the years. These days he had dribs and drabs, enough for the eggs and his tunnels, but he wasn't able to carry spring with him anymore. He couldn't wake plants, or help them grow impossibly fast. Most of the time he didn't care, didn't think about it, but Jack's describing his magical aura the way he had…

It took quite a bit of power for Aster to feel it. The subtleties were lost to him, now, or so he'd thought.

Either Jack was quite a bit stronger, magically, than he acted… or Aster could pick up on the subtleties, and wasn't aware of when he was being influenced that way.

He curled up in bed, and sighed. At least he knew why his awareness of Jack had shifted. Jack wasn't cruel, didn't delight in hurting other people. He was just… following the wrong example, so far as his manners sometimes went.
With that reassurance, he was able to go to sleep. He woke up when Jack pressed up against his back, and drifted off with the reassuring weight of Jack's arm around his waist.

Jack dodged a hoard of elves clutching ball-hammers and screwdrivers, and shrugged. "So, O Grand Designer," he said, "what've the elves got for us? Also, are we not supposed to thank them, like the shoe-making elves? Will they abandon North if we show gratitude?"

He paused, and smirked. "Would it be better for them if we did, and they did?"

Bunny swung a hand at his hand, and Jack ducked, laughing. "Don't be daft. C'mon, you brat. And remember to thank the nice elves for their hard work."

"Yeah, yeah…" Jack patted his pocket, heavy with hastily-made jewelry and trinkets. The jewelry was for himself and Bunny, the trinkets for the elves. Bunny's mention the night before of how Jack had seemed to change had gotten him thinking, and he'd spent all morning working on protective amulets... and he hoped they worked. He'd never made an amulet before, though the theory was pretty simple. Even mortal humans could do it, it wasn't like focusing on protecting the wearer while making things was hard or anything.

Bunny led the way through the workshop, his sense of direction unfazed by yelling yeti, elves running everywhere, toy planes flying through the air while boxes were carted from one end of the workshop floor to the other. Jack was almost taken out at the ankle by a toy racecar. He flipped off the yeti holding the controller, and ducked into the hallway leading to the sewing room with a distinct sense of relief.

"I saw that," Bunny grumbled, and swatted at Jack's shoulder.

He rubbed his shoulder, though there'd been no physical contact. "Did you see the yeti?" he demanded. "C'mon, Bunny."

"Be the bigger person and don't respond to their goads."

Bigger person? Jack scowled; he was five-foot-two if he stood on his toes, there was no way he'd be the bigger person. Especially not compared to seven-foot-tall yeti.

"Oh, stop it." Bunny shook his head, and waved at North. "And what're you doing here, huh?"

"I thought we could all leave together," North said, looking several shades of smug. "Tooth is accompanying me, Sandy is going as honorary winter spirit… We can take the sleigh!"

"Like hell," Bunny snarled.

"Not allowed, anyways," Jack added. "General Winter has opinions about the sleigh, North, mostly involving catapults."

Bunny flinched, no doubt imagining being in the sleigh while it was under fire. Jack reached over and cupped the poor guy's elbow. "We'll take a snow globe," he promised. "That's allowed."

Though, not for the first time, it occurred to him that he really needed to learn some of the winter magic tricks the other winter spirits knew. It'd be really cool to go from one patch of snow to the next, without having to walk around all the in-between space. He came sort of close, switching up where his gate let out, but it wasn't permanent, and was hardly portable.

He made a mental note to talk to General Winter about it, him being the friendliest of the winter spirits, and then focused on the clothes.
"Ooooh," he breathed, feeling himself light up with glee and greed. "Shiny."

The elves putting the finishing touches on the clothes looked around and cheered.

Jack stalked towards the five dummies, and grinned. Each of the costumes were breathtaking, but together they were so much more. Despite not sharing colours or design, they were still, somehow, together… and after a minute, he realized how.

North's costume had squares worked into the fabric and decoration, subtly and not, while Sandy had circles, Tooth had the four-pointed diamond. Bunny had triangles - and, of course, eggs - and Jack had hexagons. The new Guardian star up by North's globe and Manny's communication crystal thing had those same shapes.

"Wow," he breathed, reaching over to finger the closest sleeve - North's. The red velvet was as soft and plush as ermine fur. Most of his experience with fabric was in knitting, or trading for bolts of linen and canvas, so he had no idea how the elves had gotten the velvet to shimmer through several different shades of red, or how they'd managed to get black silk to show through in spots without actually creating holes in the velvet.

North's outfit was coloured in red, black, and white, was made out of velvets and silk and furs, and seemed to be based off something a little like a Russian priest's outfit and a lot like the modern, North American depiction of Santa Claus. It was an interesting mix, and promised to put at least half of General Winter's gathering to shame.

Tooth's outfit was a silk and tulle wrap, like a sari that wasn't going to get tangled up in her wings. It seemed to float around the dummy, shimmering in all the shades of violet and lavender Jack had ever imagined, and somehow through green and blue as well. Her outfit stood ready to disgrace the other half of General Winter's gathering.

The elves had made Sandy a vest and coronet of silk flowers; it wasn't as though he needed clothes made for him. The vest was a pale tan with darker gold embroidery, while the flowers ranged in shades from orange to a pale yellow that was almost white. If North and Tooth were going to out-impress the party, Sandy was going to charm them.

But it was Jack's and Bunny's outfits that were the most outlandish, Jack thought. And the most impressive, though he might have been a bit biased. Maybe. A little.

Bunny's outfit looked a lot like the coat and vest he'd hung in Jack's closet, the old, green fabric that threatened to fall apart if touched wrong. This, though, was more like a robe and over-robe set, the long skirts promising to swish and swirl around Bunny's - slippered! - feet as he walked. The main body of the robe was a deep, rich green, like holly leaves. The fabric seemed to be layered and cut so lighter shades shone through, triangles and eggs forming a geometric pattern in the background, more triangles and eggs embroidered along the neckline and hem in white and silver.

The sleeves were a shade of green that looked almost black, except for the way it shimmered in the light. The sleeves had been embroidered with triangles, the golden thread making the fabric slightly stiff. There was a violet belt, the ends apparently supposed to dangle down almost to the hem at the front. The over-robe had a high collar in that same dark green, while the rest of it was some kind of gold fabric, though there was so much embroidery, in many shades of green, that it was a little hard to tell. The over-robe was as long as the robe, though it lacked the large, bell-like sleeves, and the belt went underneath the over-robe.

Bunny's slippers were a dark green felt with leather bottoms, and tiny golden eggs took the place of strap buckles.
"Bunny," Jack breathed, and turned to the Pooka with a grin. "I'll have to beat them off you with my stick." He waggled his staff in emphasis, and laughed.

"Why'd you look at everyone else's dags before your own?"

Jack waved the question off, and moved, finally, to his own outfit. Like Bunny's, there was an over-robe, though unlike Bunny's, it looked like he had proper pants to wear. Probably a good thing. If he wasn't trapped on the dance floor for half the night, he'd be shocked, and a robe would just get him all tangled up.

The base of the costume, the trousers and the tunic, seemed simple enough. The trousers were a dark blue, almost navy, of a fabric that billowed around the dummy's legs, until they were gathered at the cuffs with what looked like two inches of white, or maybe pale silver, embroidery. The only odd part about the trousers were the panels of fabric attached to the belt, four narrow rectangles of something a little heavier than silk, but lighter than velvet, in the same shade of blue. The panels went from the belt to the cuffs of the trousers, from the sides of Jack's legs to his back, leaving the fronts of his legs free. They promised to billow around him almost like a cape, which… well, he missed the last cape he'd had. It'd billowed and fluttered in a way that made his occasionally dramatic soul thrill.

The panels seemed to be unadorned, until he shifted and light glinted off light embroidery of octagonal patterns. Neat.

The tunic was a few shades lighter than the trousers, of the same material. Like the trousers, there were about two inches of embroidery at the hem and the cuffs, while at the neck the embroidery extended further, looking like his favourite fern-frost patterns. Whatever the elves had done to the others' outfits had been done to the tunic, so the fabric seemed to ripple through lighter and darker shades of blue, and designs seemed to have been cut into it so the white fabric underneath showed through. The tunic had short sleeves that reached barely halfway down the dummy's arms, but that hardly mattered considering the over-robe.

The over-robe was where the elves had really gone wild, and that was saying something.

Jack couldn't have named that shade of blue if he tried. He'd only seen it in glacial pools, or maybe a perfect summer sky at the top of a mountain. Just the colour was enough to make Jack's heart beat a little harder, his breath come a little faster. The colour alone would have made the over-robe astonishing, but the colour was only the least of it.

There were two sets of sleeves, a shorter, elbow-length sleeve that flowed and fluttered as only silk could, and longer, tighter sleeves that clung to the arm. The over-sleeves were that rich, glacial blue, while the under-sleeves were white. The over-sleeves were embroidered with white, octagon-patterns that formed snowflakes, while the under-sleeves were embroidered with blue thread in the same patterns.

There was a short collar, made stiff with silver and gold embroidery that flowed down along the edges of the over-robe. Clearly, the over-robe wasn't meant to close; there wasn't enough material to draw the edges closed. Which meant it was supposed to billow around him, just like those panels hanging off his belt.

To finish everything off, the over-robe had been embroidered with more hexagons, the lines made up of tiny little snowflakes.

"This," he breathed, "is amazing."

The elves began to dance around the room. North moved towards him like a beaming bear, clapping
Jack on one shoulder and almost knocking him down.

"I know," North rumbled. "Elves do good work. When they want to," he added, in Russian.

"I get to keep this, right?" Jack fingered the over-robe, and giggled. Bunny looked disturbed, but whatever, he was probably used to dressing up like a super-fancy prince out of a fairy tale.

"Of course you do," Tooth said, shifting over to her outfit. "Oh, good, you can't see where it was torn. There was a little fight," she added, in response to Jack’s inquiring look. Sandy made a face, and a few signs that suggested that little was the complete opposite of what the fight had been.

Jack patted his pocket, and nodded. "I made a few things for the elves," he said, and crouched down to get a little closer to their level. They swarmed him, looking like hundreds while moving, condensing into a baker's dozen when they stopped. He distributed the little ice disks, coins etched with different winter animals. The elves seemed happy with them, thankfully, and the ice wasn't going to melt unless they dropped them in a fire.

"That was a kind thing," North said.

"Yeah, well, I didn't make you anything. Bunny, here." Jack pulled out the amulets he'd made, and tossed the handful over. Bunny unwrapped them, and tucked the washcloth into his belt.

"What're these?"

"Well, that one's an ear-clip, that one's a broach, bracelet… That's a choker." Good, all there. Jack ignored Bunny’s unimpressed expression. He was the one who didn’t recognize the jewelry in the first place. "I figured you'd want protection against winter magic. North's winter so he's safe enough, Tooth's… Tooth and Sandy's Sandy, but some of the spirits don't realize when they're doing their thing, so. If I made it all correctly, it'll block the magic from touching you."

"Oh," Bunny said, pulling his hands - and the amulets - closer to his chest. "Oh, I - Jack, thanks. You didn't have to, mate."

"Wanted to. It might look a little weird…” He directed a doubtful look at Bunny's outfit. The snowflake jewelry was going to be super obvious against the green fabric.

"She'll be right, Frostbite, I'm sure."

Jack saw Tooth and North exchanging smug glances, and rolled his eyes. "Okay, so how do I get this stuff on?" he asked. "More importantly… how do I get it off the dummy?"

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, not a lot happens - but we get a bit of an explanation about what happened in the Snow Queen's domain - whether it's TRUE or not is up for debate... and also I love my clothing designs for the Guardians. Especially Bunny and Jack.
Aster reached up to adjust the ear cuff again, only to have his hand slapped away. He leveled a glare at Tooth, who responded with a disturbingly gleeful smile. "What?"

"You what. Stop playing with it. It looks nice."

It might have looked nice, and it did, but it felt strange. The cuff had been a little chilled when he'd put it on, but it had warmed with his body heat. That said, he wasn't sure he could get used to the way it held onto his ear, since he hadn't in the hour it'd taken for everyone to get changed.

The ear clasp was a little more comfortable than the clothes. It had been almost four centuries now since he'd stopped wearing his coat and vest. It was nice, the fabric wasn't too heavy and the way it slid over his fur was actually quite enjoyable, it was just… Strange.

If he hadn't spent a decade getting used to wearing a nightgown at night, the feel of fabric on fur probably would've sent him into the nearest corner to glare at everyone and not move. And being dressed up like a dandy… he hadn't worn anything this fancy since his cousin's public vows to his chosen mate. He was going to spill something, or tear something, or both, or… ooooh why was he doing this again?

Jack leapt into view, over-robe and belt-panels fluttering. He cackled, and landed on three points, feet and hand, staff held up at an angle overhead. "Hey guys," he said, and straightened up. His feet were bare, Aster saw, at once appropriate and jarring against his finery. "Whatcha think?"

"Oh, Jack!" Tooth fluttered closer, for once reaching for the boy's collar instead of his teeth. "You look darling!"

Darling was not the word Aster would've used. Magnificent, certainly, impressive, dramatic… but not darling. That way just led to thoughts of Jack scrubbing sleep out of his eyes, bedhead barely covered by his nightcap, sitting in a puddle of flannel nightgown and bedding. That was adorable. But he also wasn't going to mention that.

"You're gonna steal the show, mate." Aster folded his arms, hands disappearing inside his sleeves. Which, ooh, had pockets on the insides. Nice. If he'd known, he would've brought over a few nibblies, like hardboiled eggs. Wasn't like he knew what food options at this thing would be like.

Jack beamed up at him, scattering thoughts of how nice a good egg would taste right now to the wind. "Thanks Bunny. You look good, too." He held up his staff, and assumed a suitably serious expression. "I meant it about beating 'em off you with my stick."

"Hah. Don't you have any jewelry for yourself, or did you stick it all on me?" He reached up to fiddle with the ear cuff again. Tooth smacked his hand, again. Jack smirked.

"Nah," he said. "Mine just blends in better. See?" He held up his arm and rotated his wrist. It took a moment, but it was hard not to smack him when Aster saw it.

"Frostbite." Aster reached up and rubbed his forehead. "Jack. No. Frost is not… Jewelry, not frost
patterns, mate."

"Oh." Jack studied his glittering sleeve. "Then I got nothing."

Tooth sighed. "Jack, you gave Bunny all these pretty - touch that ear cuff again and I'll break your fingers - decorations, but didn't save any back for yourself?"

Jack edged away from the Fairy Queen, and cleared his throat. "Uh, yeah? Essentially?" He looked a little wild about the eyes, and more than ready to dive behind Aster for protection.

This was why Aster had been so insistent Jack not go alone. Well, that and the way the Snow Queen had done something to Jack during that mockery of tea. Winter spirits, with a lone exception, weren't safe.

"Here," Aster said, and reached for his cuff. Tooth and Jack slapped his hand away.

"That's for you," Jack said, in unison with Tooth, who said, "Don't be silly, that's yours."

He glared at the both of them. "Yes, thank you." He nursed his stinging fingers, and very carefully did not pout.

"What is this?" North asked, striding down the stairs - as compared to jumping like the Show Pony. He looked suitably dramatic even walking, and beamed impartially at them all. "And where is Sandy?"

"Raiding the kitchen. I told him General Winter isn't going to serve eggnog, Sandy demanded at least three bottles." Jack paused, and wrinkled his nose. "Or maybe seven…? The number went by really quick."

"Probably three, Sandy's not the type to overindulge." Aster started to reach for the ear cuff, caught sight of the gleam in Tooth's eye, and lowered his hand.

"They're upset I didn't make any sparklies for myself." Jack waved his hand at Tooth, and then jerked his thumb at Aster. "I don't need it!"

North rolled his eyes. "Could you at least make yourself matching ear cuff? It's for appearance of thing."

Jack rolled his eyes right back. "Sure." It took him a second, almost literally, and then he was pinning the lace-work cuff to his ear. His, Aster could see, was ice and not the enchanted material of his own gift, but that would hardly matter to a winter spirit. "Happy?"

"Ecstatic," North replied, in such a dry voice Aster had to grin. "I will get Sandy. Shouldn't leave without him, and might have to help carry eggnog."

Jack fiddled with his ear cuff - and got away with it, Aster noticed - and then turned back to the two of them. "I'm missing something about the jewelry," he said, and squinted at Aster.

"Don't look at me, mate, I haven't the slightest." He looked over at Tooth, who smirked and shook her head.

"Not on your life, boys. But you look very nice, Jack. Do you want to get your ear pierced permanently some time?"

"Uh." Jack's hands fluttered, as if he didn't know whether to clutch his ears or his staff. "No?
"Thanks?"

"That's a pity." Tooth drifted away to join North, who was towing Sandy along like an exasperated bear and her cub. Sandy clutched two bottles of eggnog, while North had a third.

Jack settled on hunching his shoulders and edging behind Aster.

"Maybe an ankle cuff," Aster suggested, and gestured at Jack's bare feet. "Or toe rings. Take advantage of those missing shoes."

Jack's affronted expression was well worth it.

In short order, North had them all gathered together, and threw a snow globe. The portal opened onto a clearing in what looked like a tree farm, of all things, and they trooped through with little fanfare. Once Aster's stomach had settled down, he looked closer at their surroundings and revised his estimate of where they were. Not a tree farm, more of an orchard. Russia, obviously, considering their host, but who knew exactly where.

Closer to the southern border, probably, considering it wasn't that cold. Winter, yes, and the snow was almost up to Aster's knee; he envied Tooth and Sandy, who flew above the stuff, while Jack walked on top, light as thistle down. But snow aside, the air was still, enough humidity in the air that it felt a few degrees warmer than it probably was.

"Now," North said. He stroked his beard. "Where is the door?"

"This way," Jack said, and skipped ahead to the lead. "Snow's lower here, too."

So it proved, reaching only to mid-calf instead of up to the knee. The clothes shed the wet nicely, Aster found, though it probably helped that the wet was frozen and not inclined to stick to anything. Still, saved him having to wander around with soaked hems for the entire visit.

Jack led the way between the trees for several meters, finally coming to two trees that had grown together, branches twining and wrapping around until it wasn't possible to tell which branch belonged to which tree. It formed a rudimentary archway, the air between shimmering as though a great spider web, coated with dew, had been stretched between the trunks.

"Here we go," Jack said, and gestured at the archway. "Who wants to go first?"

Aster peered at the shimmering energy, and edged closer to Jack. It wasn't possible to do so subtly, but he did his best.

"I will go," North said, and offered Tooth his arm. She accepted with an expression better suited to the cat than the canary, and hovered beside him as he advanced through the shimmering veil of magic. Their colours blurred and wavered, and then faded like mist in sunlight. Sandy followed, but instead of shimmering, he seemed to dissolve into a swirl of golden sand.

Jack offered his arm. "Wanna hang on for the trip?" he asked.

Aster frowned. "I can't tell if you're joking or not."

The winter spirit grinned, and waggled his eyebrows. After a moment's indecision, Aster took hold of Jack's elbow, and smirked at Jack's shock. "You really thought I'd decline such a generous and gentlemanly offer?" he asked.

"Uh. Well. Yeah?" Jack went to rub the back of his neck, and clocked himself in the head with his
"Ow!"

"Yeah. Don't do that." Aster started towards the archway, almost towing Jack. Jack focused as they passed through the gateway, which felt as weird as it'd looked for the others, and had a sober expression on his face as they blinked away the sparkles and took in the space.

The doorway seemed to let out in the middle of General Winter's domain, at the gates of a massive castle hulking in front of them. Behind them was a drawbridge, let down, over a moat. On the other side of the moat was a tall wall that seemed to encircle the castle.

"C'mon," Jack said, and started towards the castle gate. Aster looked the stonework over; notably, unlike the Snow Queen, General Winter had used materials other than snow and ice in his domain. His castle seemed to be made out of a dark gray granite shot through with paler gray, and the portcullis was some kind of dark metal, iron or steel. Everything glittered with a faint dusting of frost or snow, but the ground underfoot was cobblestone, and the air might have been chill, but it wasn't cold.

He looked down at Jack for an explanation, but the winter spirit was focused entirely on another of his number, a pale-faced man with graying hair frozen in spikes. He wore livery in pale blue and gray, blue trousers and gray tunic, but was otherwise unremarkable, a generic Russian man. He smiled and greeted Jack by name, while all the while studying Aster with mild curiosity in his brown eyes.

They moved on, down a short stretch of hallway; the ceiling overhead had three murder holes, though someone had considerately put wooden caps over them.

"Who was that?" Aster asked, once they were - presumably - out of earshot.

"Don't know his name, but he's one of the General's ghosts." Jack placed his staff against the ground in time with his steps, and shrugged. "General Winter doesn't flex his muscles much, anymore, but when he did, the people who died in his storms… Well, usually the ghosts faded quickly, but some of them didn't, and they became his minions, I guess."

Aster very carefully didn't shiver at the thought. It wasn't just the ghosts, though they were spooky enough; ghosts were dead, souls without bodies, completely unlike the undead that were bodies without souls, or the brought-back, spirits like the river maidens, the Yuki-Onna, or even Jack. The brought-back had died, yes, but as with CPR and those electroshock paddles, they'd returned to life… albeit altered from the magic involved.

Ghosts, though. Souls weren't meant to experience the world directly, without buffering; most ghosts went insane within a year of their death, if the misery didn't drive them on to whatever afterlife awaited them.

For General Winter to have ghosts serving him… Aster didn't know. He'd have thought the wailing and tearing at the walls would have made them poor servants.

"He gives them bodies," Jack said, peering up at Aster through his bangs. Aster supposed the direction of his thoughts must have been obvious.

"Bodies?"

"Snow and ice, and it all looks like how they were when they… you know. They don't need to eat or drink anymore, but the false bodies keep them sane." Jack shrugged. "And none of them want to move on, so, you know."
They left the hallway, and were directed by another frozen-looking footman around a corner and through large, double doors.

The sight of the ballroom knocked any possible response Aster could think of completely out of his mind. Ghosts? What about them? There was a swirl of colour and wash of noise and fewer scents than he'd expected, but still a fair number.

He hadn't realized how many winter spirits there were. There were a handful in livery, what seemed to be General Winter's theme colours of pale gray and blue, but the rest... there must have been nearly two hundred spirits all gathered together. Some were dancing. Most were gossiping. A group seemed to be providing music, but he couldn't see them, so couldn't tell if they were guests or servants or something else.

Jack stopped in the doorway, a genial, friendly smile curving his lips. The winter spirits that caught sight of the two of them hushed, turning to look at them; at Jack, specifically.

It took several minutes, but shortly all the winter spirits were silent, watching them. It was a sea of vaguely predatory expressions, something as a Pooka Aster was especially sensitive to. And then, as if the group was a red sea instead of a winter one, the crowd parted and a jovial looking man walked towards them, arms open in welcome.

He was a shorter, older-looking man, and where everyone else was dressed in what was clearly their best, he was dressed in winter working clothes. He wore a furry black hat, similar to North's, but different in some way relating to Cossack-vs-Russian insanity. He wore a heavy, beige wool great coat that covered him from neck to wrists to mid-calf, so only his head, hands, and booted feet were visible. Like North, he was white-haired, but unlike North his hair seemed to be trimmed to ear length, no longer, and his facial hair was limited to a long, drooping mustache. He walked with a short, mostly straight staff, and had a string of white fox tails slung over one shoulder. He could have been any Middle Ages Russian grandfather, just come indoors from running a trapline.

He left bloody footprints on the floor.

Aster's grip on Jack's elbow tightened, entirely involuntarily. Jack glanced up at him, and every other winter spirit shifted their attention from Jack to Aster.

"Hey, General, have you met Bunny before?" Jack asked, turning back to General Winter. The mass-murdering Russian storm system paused, and stroked his mustache in contemplation.

"I do not believe so," he finally said. His eyes were a washed-out brown, somewhere between true brown and gray in colour. "I have had the hearing of you, but not the speaking of you."

"Same goes," Aster said, as carefully as he dared. Compliments should go over well, everyone liked them. "Your domain's impressive, what little I've seen of it."

"Perhaps I can arrange a walking for you, later. You agree, Jack, yes? Walking through my fields, very lovely." General Winter smiled, though the expression didn't meet his eyes.

Jack pretended to think it over, but Aster could already tell he'd decline. Why? "We'll have to talk about it, later." He smiled back, all teeth and narrowed eyes.

General Winter nodded, and folded his hands over his stomach. "Well, welcome to my gathering. My safety upon you this night."

"Thank you, General," Jack said, and inclined his head. "We are welcomed."
General Winter smiled at them one more time, and then walked back into the crowd, which immediately resumed dancing and gossiping.

Aster looked from General Winter's bloody footprints to Jack, and back again. "That was surprisingly mannerly," he said. "From the way you talked, I was expecting you to hang by your knees from the rafters."

"Early days," Jack said, and smirked. "I like annoying him."

Aster reached up and pinched the bridge of his muzzle. Lovely.

Chapter End Notes

Oh look, the party has begun! (Finally.) I went to find the drawing that inspired this depiction of General Winter, but nada. I searched for it at work, found it, but at home... nope... Very strange.

Edit: The wonderful Nike found the picture, so here:
http://evildisco.deviantart.com/art/General-Winter-58333656
General Winter, in all his aged glory.

Also, I love this chapter, for various reasons but mostly certain character's lines and actions, and I hope you have as much fun reading it as I did writing it.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The winter spirits were unnerving enough that Aster spent the first two hours of the gathering all but plastered to Jack's side. It wasn't the threat of violence; he could have handled that, easily enough. Even if he was out of shape… and he really needed to start working on that… he could have handled mere violence.

Rather, it was the air of restrained malice that had him so unnerved. It wasn't just that these were all, for the most part, predatory spirits. It was that they were, one and all, the sort to torture before killing their victims.

Jack circled the room, Aster at his side, greeting Snow Maidens with dried blood under their manicures, and Yuki-Onna with feline-sharp teeth. There were frozen men and snow men, the great powers and a fair number of lesser.

And they all watched him, him and Jack. Jack's gifts seemed to work, so far as keeping the ambient winter magic from working on his mind, but that didn't really help when he kept catching sight of spirits licking their lips and staring at him.

Still, when nothing actually happened, he forced himself to leave Jack's side, and seek out North and Tooth.

They were dancing, of course, a waltz of some sort. The steps were simple enough; Aster moved close and stepped in, stealing Tooth away before North knew what was happening.

"Bunny!" Tooth beamed up at him, tinier than usual what with her feet being on the floor. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Not sure," he said, and shook his head in the negative. "More people than I'm used to seeing in one place." Which was true enough.

"Probably doesn't help how interested in you everyone is." Tooth squeezed his hand. "Everyone's been saying you're the new Persephone."

The new… "I wasn't kidnapped," he said. Why would they call him that? Persephone had been kidnapped. Technically.

Tooth actually looked pitying, but changed the subject to some of the dresses she'd seen. Aster followed her lead; while he and Jack were the only ones wearing truly alien costumes, the historical outfits were strange enough from a modern perspective to qualify for the description as well. There were pantaloons and hairstyles that towered nearly two feet over everyone's heads. There were ruffles and lace and colours bright, dark, and clashing, sometimes all on the same dress. Most of the costumes belonged to some part of Eurasia - French, Chinese, and Russian for the most part, to his untutored eye - but there were enough from South America and New Zealand to be worth noting.

Tooth kept him company for two dances, before all but shoving him at a young lady who looked, well, harmless compared to the rest of the winter spirits. Her clothing was almost drab in contrast, and he would have thought she was there as a guest but for the frost shifting and flowing over her skin.
"Oh," she said, when he stumbled to a stop in front of her. "Hello."

"I think that was a subtle hint on my friend's part," he said, and held out one hand. "Care to dance?"

She beamed up at him, her teeth faintly red along the gum line. He did his best to ignore it. "Kind of you to ask."

Aster escorted her out onto the dance party, doing his best not to stare. Besides her rather plain blue and white dress, she was emaciated in appearance, looking like she had a naturally fifteen-inch waist. Her cheeks were hollow, the bones of her skull showing through clearly, the rest of her skeleton just as visible wherever the dress didn't cover her; neckline and hands, mostly.

"I'm Eliza," she said.

"Call me Bunny, most everyone does."

Her smile was closed-mouthed and just a touch wicked. "Oh, I know what the Groundhog calls you, that jerk. Don't worry, I won't repeat it."

"Thanks." Correct one blithering idiot and he held a grudge forever. They stepped into the waltz, and quickly took the measure of each other. There was something about Eliza's feet or legs that kept her from taking full steps, so Aster shortened his stride to accommodate.

"You're not what I expected," she said, after a few more turns about each other.

"Oh?" It was hard not to step too far and force her to stumble to keep up; it took up more of his attention that he'd expected. He almost stumbled a few times himself.

"The way everyone talks about you - the spirits, I mean, not the children." Eliza nodded towards the refreshments table. "Would you mind if we stopped? My feet…"

"No problem, if you don't mind keeping this old Bunny company." Jack wasn't in sight, and Eliza seemed the nicest of the winter spirits.

"So," he asked, once they'd relocated; Eliza to a chair with a cup of punch, Aster standing next to her with his own cup. "What do people say about me?"

She studied him, and then shrugged. "You're taller than I expected. They talk about you as though you're some… some feral animal, but then they also talk as if you're the greatest of scholars. Also, you're a spring spirit."

Aster hid his expression with his cup, and lowered it only when he'd gotten some control over his face. "Easy to be mistaken for a scholar when you're just old."

Eliza laughed, and turned their conversation to the dancing being done; "I really prefer the swing dancing, from before World War two," she admitted. "Not that I'm any good at it, but it's a bit livelier than this, don't you think?"

"I think all that whirling about would give a bloke vertigo," Aster replied, making her laugh again.

It wasn't long after that when Jack showed up, dropping down out of the rafters like a particularly ill-mannered monkey. "Making friends, Cottontail?" he asked, and peered at Eliza. Who suddenly looked nervous. Strange.

"Jack, this is Eliza. Eliza, I suppose you already know Jack?"
"Of him, at least," she said, and started to stand up.

"Nah, its fine. What part of the country are you from?" Jack leaned sideways against his staff, an expression of polite interest on his face.

Eliza's smile twisted, became bitter. "Have you heard of the Donner party?" she asked. Jack nodded; Aster frowned, not recognizing the reference. "I was one of the survivors." She let her lips part for a moment, revealing her faintly bloody teeth.

"Oh," Jack said, and blinked. "Did you…?"

"No, not that anyone believed me," she said, and frowned. "Most of us didn't, really, no matter what the stories said… at least, I think not, but…" She sighed, and turned one hand up in a helpless gesture. "The cannibalism did happen, I can confirm that."

Aster blinked, and stared at the tiny waif of a child. Cannibalism? Her? Wait, no, she'd said she hadn't…

Jack seemed to notice his confusion. "The Donner party was a group of settlers heading into California," he said. "Back in the old wagon train days. They were crossing the mountains in winter, got stuck… A lot of the guys died of starvation and illness."

"We starved," Eliza said. "Some folks ate the hide tents we had. More folks would have survived, I think, if the men hadn't been so determined to cut through the brush… For that matter, if we'd taken the real route to California, but… Well."

"The natives didn't like the settlers," Jack clarified. "I think scalping was involved, though that might've been further east… And asking any of the guys in Summerland just gets you creepy grins and occasional war whoops, so who knows."

"I didn't have any part in eating… well. I was a servant, for one. But after our rescue we were all tarred with the same brush, and some of the survivors went a bit… a bit off in the head, told the newspapers they had done horrible things even when they hadn't…" Eliza brushed several strands of hair back off her forehead, and sighed. "I don't know why I became a spirit, when no one else did."

Aster swallowed, and then cleared his throat. "And your feet, is that from…?"

"I was one of the group that tried snowshoeing out to get help, when we first got stuck. I can walk fine with the snowshoes on." She regarded one foot with a bitter scowl, and then shrugged. All the disquiet seemed to drain from her then, so she only looked tired, and a little resigned. "At least as a winter spirit, people do not whisper about me as if I'm evil. Considering my company…"

She gestured at the whirling throng, and shrugged again. True enough; compared to other winter spirits, someone who at least claimed not to have participated in cannibalism was practically a saint. Aster glanced down at Jack, and caught him regarding Eliza with the oddest expression he'd seen, something halfway between calculating and protective.

"Do the other spirits cause you problems?" he asked.

She blinked at him. "Nothing worth mentioning. I'm not treated as one of them, but they don't hunt me, either."

Jack's expression darkened at the mention of hunting, which - winter spirits hunted each other? Aster stared at the brightly swirling crowd, and stifled a shiver. Of course they hunted each other. Dried blood under their nails and fangs hidden behind brightly painted lips. Why was he surprised?
"If anyone comes after you, call me," Jack said. "I'll deal with it. You're nominally winter, but I'm fully. And I don't approve of that."

"Fully?" Aster repeated. The other two ignored him.

"Thank you," Eliza said. "I appreciate the thought."

"It's not a thought, it's a vow," Jack grumbled, but he smiled all the same.

He left after that, vanishing quickly into the crowd. Aster looked back at Eliza. "What'd he mean, nominally and fully?"

Eliza blinked up at him, and then covered her mouth with one hand. A sound, what the uncharitable might have called a giggle, was just audible over everyone else talking quietly with each other. "You don't know?" she asked.

"Know what?"

She giggled again. "I'm... I'm really sorry, but if Jack hasn't told you, I don't think I should. He might disapprove."

Aster scowled, and tossed back the rest of his punch. "Want a refill?"

"Oooh, and would you mind bringing back some of those spinach puffs?" Eliza leaned forward, looking eager.

"There's crab, too -"

"Oh, no. After, well, after, I became a vegetarian. Meat, yeuch..."

Chapter End Notes

Part one of the party. Seems to be going well, don't you think?

I'm a wee bit cranky because I'm fighting off a cold and haven't gone riding all week, but in other news my new desk has arrived! And I have (mostly) put it up - just the hutch left, but that's for... some other time, such as when I've recovered from wrestling with heavy stuff...
Chapter 25

Jack found himself dragged into a stately circle dance by a handful of Yuki-Onna and white-tailed Kitsune. He didn't much mind; the Yuki-Onna weren't that bad, and the Kitsune were more mischievous than anything. Sure, the Yuki-Onna killed guys and the Kitsune played sometimes-lethal tricks on people, but they weren't actively malicious the way other winter spirits were. More of an eye-for-an-eye mindset than anything.

Heck, a few Yuki-Onna actively went out and helped kids to safety in snowstorms. Others actively went out looking for dinner, but variety was the spice of life or something.

The dancing wasn't as bad as it normally was; the Yuki-Onna and Kitsune weren't bothered by his not knowing their names, and the dancing was fast enough to be fun, but slow enough no one became out of breath. When it finished, they hustled him off the floor - which was being taken over by the Russians and Cossacks for a competition - over to the table with Oriental offerings; sake and baijiu, bite-sized spring rolls and dumplings and sushi, things Jack couldn't recognize and things he did but didn't know the name of. He gave everyone small cups of whatever drink they preferred, and leaned back against his staff with a cup of spiced fruit juice. Cherry, if he was getting that taste right.

"The spring spirit is quite adorable, Sama," one of the Kitsune said. Her fangs were very white; Tooth would've gone all a-flutter if she'd seen them. "Have you known him long?"

Ah yes, gossip. The second entertainment at these things.

Behind them, on the dance floor, several Russian bathhouse spirits were starting off with a bit of pose-and-brag. It was getting quite a bit of attention. It was probably safe enough to talk a little about Bunny.

"Yeah. First caught sight of him a little over fifty years after I became a spirit," he said. "First person outside of winter I ever met."

A Yuki-Onna sighed, and her eyelashes fluttered. "Such a long time," she breathed. "Have you been companions for all of it?"

"Not all of it." Jack grinned, crooked and fond. "But our relationship got a lot closer about a decade ago."

Well, that was one way to put it. Still, no way he was giving these spirits anything to use against Bunny, and the Pooka's still-precarious emotional state was one arrow he'd keep in the quiver.

A winter archer of some kind finished selecting his morsels of food, and wandered off.

The Kitsune and Yuki-Onna exchanged smiles, and leaned closer. "What is he like?" A Yuki-Onna asked, her eyes very wide and strangely innocent. He must have gathered all the nicer Yuki-Onna... and quite probably the nicer Kitsune, too. They all had that innocent little-girl look, even the male-presenting Kitsune.

Jack snickered. "Adorable," he decided. "You'd figure the Easter Bunny would like eggs, but... he really likes eggs. Not so much chickens, though..."
One of the Kitsune blinked. "But… chicken is tasty," he protested.

"They chase him around screaming their fool heads off. Dunno why he's so bothered by greyhounds, its chickens that really want to kill him."

A chorus of giggles followed his announcement, and Jack grinned.

A Yuki-Onna snuck a peek over at Bunny from around one of her sisters, and tilted her head. "Why is he talking to that one?" she asked.

Jack quickly double-checked that it was Eliza she was talking about, and shrugged. "Bunny's not much for dancing, and she's apparently just as much of a wallflower. I think they're talking plants now?" Or something like that; he hadn't overheard them since getting dragged onto the dance floor, but it was a reasonable guess. He was pretty sure he'd seen Bunny mouth the word 'rosehips' last time he'd glanced over.

"You aren't worried?" One of the Kitsune sidled up to him on one side; a Yuki-Onna pressed close on the other. It wasn't predatory, or even flirtatious. Probably their attempt at being comforting, though why he'd need it he hadn't the slightest idea.

"Oh, I made him protective amulets. The ear cuff…" He reached up and fiddled with his. "So no one will be able to do a magic on him."

One of the male-presenting Kitsune cooed at that. "It's very lovely," he said, and reached over to fiddle with Jack's hair. With a few quick twists of his fingers, the Kitsune had put a tiny braid in Jack's bangs. Which, drat, meant his hair was getting long again… maybe Bunny would help him cut it after the party.

"Thanks. I also made the rest of the jewelry," he added.

"So generous!" And once more, he had Kitsune and Yuki-Onna sighing over him. Or possibly Bunny. Quite probably both. Ah well, whatever kept them out of trouble.

"So," one of the Yuki-Onna said, sidling closer. "What is it like, to have someone -"

Jack snapped one hand up, cutting her off. He'd heard -

There. A quiet yelp, a laugh, and a snarl.

"Excuse me," he said, and leapt into the air. Two feet over everyone's head, he caught sight of just what had drawn his attention.

An ogre. More importantly, an ogre glaring down at Bunny.

Yeah. No.

Jack could float indoors, but not fly. Which didn't mean much, since he had other, faster options at hand.

He dropped back down to head height - or rather, standing-on-peoples'-heads height - and ran forward, steps light enough most people only realized what he'd done until he was moving to the next person. He was partially floating, enough not to hurt the spirits he stepped on; General Winter's 'no violence' rule extended to him, too.

He dropped down when he'd reached Bunny, and switched to strolling along the floor as easily as
he'd run over peoples' heads before. "What's up?" he asked, and took the situation in at a glance.

Eliza had one hand clasped to her nose, tears of pain and frustration in her eyes. He knew it was frustration because her pupils had gone red; cannibal spirits tended to do that when they got angry. And whatever she'd done in life, in death, well.

Bunny was standing between Eliza and the ogre, practically vibrating with rage, a low growl thrumming through the air. But he was unhurt, and now that Jack was here, going to stay that way.

The ogre, on the other hand… He was a spectacularly ugly brute for his species, hulking at twice Bunny's height and three times his mass. Maybe four times; it was a big ogre. People normally mistook ogres for abominable snowmen, when they weren't making that same mistake with the yeti. It was just with ogres, they were the ones to chase down and try to eat humans.

This one was clean, so to speak. His hair, matted into a filthy tangle, had been drawn back in something approximating a queue. An attempt had been made at brushing the equally tangled and filthy beard; Jack could still see bits of broken comb trapped here and there. The extremely rough clothing had been beaten to remove some of the dirt, so it was possible to see it was clothing and not, say, the ogre's shaggy hide.

Jack had met ogres before, some uglier than this one, some… less ugly. Ogres never really got better than that. Almost ironically, the uglier the ogre, the smarter they seemed to be.

Well. More or less.

The ogre growled, and pointed one finger - almost as thick as Jack's forearm - at Bunny.

Almost appropriately, the ogre had a Glaswegian accent, only more so. He certainly had the Glasgow smile.

"That rabbit is being rude, eh Frost? Bint deserved the smack, she did, being all mouthy like that. Step yourself aside and pull the rabbit off too. Burt will deal with her." The ogre's deep voice got even deeper, and spittle began to gather at the corners of his mouth. "Burt will tear her arms off, and crunch her little bint's legs, yes."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "And you're Burt, then?" he asked. He set his staff against the floor, and rolled it idly between his hands. He glanced back over his shoulder at Eliza, and blinked. "Hey, Eliza, is your nose bleeding?"

The cannibal spirit looked from him to Burt and back again, the red slowly overtaking the colour in her irises. "Yes," she said, a few drops dribbling past her fingers down her chin and wrist. Her eyes were almost glowing, the red hue had become so intense. In contrast, her blood looked almost drab. "He hit me."

Jack looked back at Burt, and sighed. "Y'know, General Winter said there'd be no violence."

The ogre paused, and stared at him while the rusty cogs in his mind started to turn. "The bint's not of winter," he said, though a little doubt sounded in his voice.

"Oh," Jack said, and smiled with every tooth in his head. "She is."

"And winter or no, all guests are protected," General Winter added, stepping forward out of the gathering crowd. His magic hovered around him, nearly visible and heavy with his ire, like a storm system brooding on the horizon. Jack felt it brush against him, repulsed by his own aura, and against Bunny, protected by Jack's gifts. Eliza went a little pale, and swayed in her seat, but he doubted it
was in pain.

The ogre glowered at General Winter, and shook one massive fist. "You're naught but a weak little twig, you are," he growled. General Winter's expression, already grim, went grimmer. And a little gleeful, but Jack understood. It was the same glee sparkling in his veins, after all.

"What," he asked, before General Winter could. "You think we're going to fight you? You broke guest rights, Burt. That's not a fight, that's an execution."

Bunny snapped his head around and stared at Jack, but he barely noticed. He looked over at General Winter, who gestured at the ogre with a magnanimous expression.

"No more shed blood," General Winter said.

Jack raised his eyebrows, and grinned at the ogre. "Hear that, Burt?" he asked. "No blood of yours shed. Leaves me a lot of options though, doesn't it Burt? Strangulation, that's a good one. If we had the supplies, dumping a pot of boiling gold on your head might be a fun option. But… nah. Think I'll go with an oldie, but goodie."

The ogre swung at Jack, snarling wordlessly. Jack sidestepped the blow, and pointed his shepherd's crock at him.

The wind hit the ogre, edged in ice and cold as the Antarctic mountains. The ogre cowered away from the blow, clothes and fur covered in hard rime. The rime got thicker, breaking off in chunks when the ogre tried to move, shattering on the floor. In seconds, the ogre stopped moving and Jack left off the attack.

In the space of mere seconds, Burt had gone from a loud, threatening brute to an ice-coated lump, frozen in place. What skin was visible was blackened by frostbite, making for tiny patches of darkness against the pale, silvery-gray of the ice.

General Winter looked the frozen lump over, and nodded once in approval. Then he swung his fist, hitting Burt on one frozen shoulder.

The ice shattered, and with it, flesh. The ogre had been frozen clear through. The sharp-edged pieces began to frost over in the warmer air, glittering in the light. If it hadn't been so gruesome, it would've been pretty, Jack supposed.

He turned away to check on Eliza, and caught sight of Bunny's expression. There was something odd about it, but when he looked again, Bunny had smoothed the strangeness away, so he only looked mildly disturbed.

Jack made a mental note to ask Bunny about it later, when they weren't among all the other winter spirits.

Chapter End Notes

This is actually the last chapter dealing with the party. Now we move onto the aftermath, muwahahahaha... (Sorry for the short chapter, but the next scene is going to be super-long because there is seriously no where good to break it into two, so... probably nine pages? Sigh.)
Also, work (AKA that place I write this thing) has established a new policy insuring we're no longer able to email our home email addresses (so no more work to home). I could still email, admittedly, but that would involve going through the public thing, which... yeah... So I will be replacing one thing I shouldn't do (emailing myself) with another thing I shouldn't do (bring a thumb drive in to work so I can transfer files) all so I can continue sending stuff home about the third thing I shouldn't be doing (write fanfic... though when it's slow and there's nothing to do it's fanfic or staring at the ceiling. So, you know, choices...)
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hoag beamed when Nicholas knocked on the door to his office, and waved him in. The head of the hydroponics gardens was short for a yeti, an inch or two shorter than Nicholas was, instead of four to six inches taller. In any other species, Hoag would be considered leucistic with his blond fur and blue eyes, but among yeti he only resembled the glacier-bred meh-teh. There were some few meh-teh among Nicholas' employees, but that particular group of yeti preferred to be out and about, it seemed. Nomadic, unlike the more settled lowland yeti.

"I welcome you in my space," Hoag said, gesturing to the visitor's chair.

"I am welcome," Nicholas said, and sat down. Hoag's office was a particularly pleasant space; green, growing things spread and flowered and climbed and he wasn't sure what all else, while the lights - solar lights he'd magicked to be almost identical to the real thing - warmed everything to a comfortable temperature. It reminded him, a little, of that small piece of Bunny's Warren he had seen some years back. Albeit with Hoag's mate's attempts at sculpture in odd places. Mariotte was not very good at sculpture; it wasn't that they were bad, just bland. Hoag showed them off anyways.

"So," Nicholas said. He offered a small bag of Ice-Wind's latest baking efforts, gingersnap and cinnamon-swirl cookies. Hoag made the appropriate noises, and tucked them away in his desk for later, to share with his mate and children. "You are well, my friend?"

Hoag settled back in his chair, and nodded. "The eldest of mine, he has chosen a trade. Negotiations for the apprentice fee have begun. In a week's time there will be a new understudy to Airstone in the reservoir of knowledge."

Or the library, Nicholas thought, suddenly amused. The yeti's occasionally poetic turn of speech tended to make him smile. "But that is very good news," he said. "And your youngest?"

Hoag's expression went from satisfied to smug. "Soon to be the middle child, not the youngest."

"Hah!"

They went over a bit more gossip, mostly about Hoag's family - who the cousins were courting, if there were any new nibblings in the offering, that sort of thing - before moving on to the business. Production was down by half a percent, but that was only to be expected; while the gardens were all inside, temperature controlled and kept at an optimum lighting for constant growth, every plant needed time to recover after a harvest. Sometimes the periods of recovery overlapped, as it did now; such periods were perfect times for the yeti who worked with the plants to take vacation time.

The loss of productivity, minimal as it was, wouldn't affect anything other than the workload for the hydroponics workers. The workshop, both the visible tip rising up above the mountain crag, and the much larger portion within the mountain itself, would simply have to forgo certain fresh vegetables for a few weeks.

Nicholas took leave from Hoag, and moved down a level and to one side, going to the animal pens, though that was perhaps too small a word for what had been built up over the years.

There were vast acres of grassland, entire small forests, small lakes and a river that went from lazy to wild and back again, encircling it all. A single room, no matter how big, would not have been
enough space for what had been needed, and so they had instead created a cavern with great support pillars rising up at odd intervals. By necessity, the animals were housed on one of the highest levels of the underground workshop, in order to vent the various gasses outside.

Animal care was mostly under the purview of the Sasquatch, the yetis’ North American cousins. Apparently, just as the yeti had once roamed all of Eurasia, the Sasquatch had ranged from the glaciers up north to just below the land currently called 'Mexico', though no one now remembered why they hadn't covered South America either.

Where the yeti were rather stocky, with heavy, triple-layered fur even in the climate controlled Workshop, the Sasquatch were taller, narrower, built less for brute strength and more for speed and stamina. The Sasquatch also had only two layers of fur, the long hair they kept year round, and the thick, fluffy fur that grew in as the seasons outside turned to autumn and winter, and shed when spring came around once more. The fur was as good as sheep wool for spinning into yarn, and was better than wool when it came to making cashmere.

Autumn, the yeti in charge of Nicholas’ small horse herd, met him at the door to the lift. "Old-Youngster," she said, and made her people's gesture of welcome, a rolling hand wave that started at the opposite shoulder and ended down at the level of her hip. "You are just in time. We have brought new blood into the herd, and the bearing mares are about ready to drop their foals."

"This is wonderful news," Nicholas said, and followed her to the fields claimed by the horse herd, where the terrain had been sculpted into a mostly level plain, broken only by the great support pillars. As climbing ivy and flowering vines had been planted at the base of each pillar, they didn't stand out so much as they had back when this whole section had been new. The long grass spreading across the ground had been cropped short where the herd was currently grazing.

He'd always had something of a weakness for horses; growing up, the rare cat he'd seen had always been, it seemed, a feral, half-mad thing out to kill every human it could, while the dogs had either been highly-bred fancies of the nobles, or mutts belonging to peasants, wary of anyone not their owner. Horses though… Oh, Nicholas had loved it, every time they stole a horse or took a noble captive; the boy, then called Nicholai, had been put in charge of taking care of the animals, and he'd proven to have quite the touch with them. And every horse had been special in some way, be it highly bred and constantly nervous, with silken coat and expensive tack, or a beaten down nag, with a rough coat worn to patches by ill-fitting harness and a mouth gone hard from being constantly yanked on.

As he'd gotten older, Nicholai had gone from merely caring for the horses to riding them, a born natural. If he had been born in another age, no doubt he would have been snapped up either for the cavalry, or to represent his country in the Equestrian events in the Olympics. There had not been a single horse he couldn't ride - he'd even ridden a centaur, though that had been with mutual agreement and life-threatening danger at their heels - and if adventure hadn't called louder, he would have been happy to settle down into a life as a horse trainer, breeder, and seller.

He loved the reindeer that pulled his sleigh, of course, but it was the horses that had his soul.

As they approached, the herd boss, a Russian Don Nicholas called Mily, lifted his head and then bugled a greeting when he caught sight of the two of them. Mily moved from a standstill into a free-flowing gallop, golden coat shimmering under the artificial light. Nicholas laughed, and held his hands out as the stallion came to an easy stop in front of him. He satisfied the both of them by stroking Mily's nose and rubbing under the horse's forelock, getting an expression of ecstasy for his efforts.

"Hello, my old friend," he murmured, seeking out itchy spots and scratching them. The horse sighed
and leaned into the touches, eyes half-closed, and he grunted when Nicholas got a particularly itchy spot.

The horse trailed after them as they moved on to the rest of the herd, mares and geldings and a few yearlings not yet old enough to train to harness, but too old to tag along at their mothers' heels. There were chestnuts and grays, bays and palominos, a lone creamello - the horse was of no particular breeding, and was in truth almost ugly compared to the rest of the herd, but he and Nicholas had weathered a rather harrowing adventure together some fifteen years back and Nicholas hadn't been able to bear parting with him. Of the fifty horses, over half of them were Russian Dons; the remaining twenty-five were the mongrel creamello called Nifty, a handful of Budyonny horses that ranged between 'Massive', 'Eastern' and 'Middle' breed types, several graceful Arabian and Turkmenian horses, and enough Karabakh horses to make a breeder salivate.

Once Nicholas had assured himself as to the new horses - still a little wary around a new person, though they were pleased enough to accept chunks of apples and carrots from him - and the bearing mares, he saddled up a dark bay Don he had named Valery, and rode her to check on the livestock.

The cattle, both beef and milk, grazed in a somewhat more lush - and it had to be said, damp - section of grassland, the grass growing shorter but thicker. Simply for ease of recognition, the milk cows were the almost cliché black and white spotted, while the beef were colours ranging from red-brown to black. The milk cows were nearly as tame as the horses were, and for good reason, being handled daily for the milking, but the beef cows watched Nicholas and their handlers with wary, barely restrained ill-will; anyone trying to pet a beef cow was likely to be gored and trampled.

From the cattle he turned Valery to the thin woods, where the Sasquatch ran pigs and pheasants and rabbits; of those creatures, only the pigs were tamed down, and then only those selected to breed, as they would be kept for several years and grew big and fierce, with sharp tusks. It was safer, as a fully grown pig could threaten even one of the Sasquatch.

There were chicken runs, with huge pens for the hens to walk around in, and fish farms full of just about every fresh-water and edible fish. There were the salt-water ponds, even one large one that might as well be called a lake, where the seafood and edible kelps were raised and grown. Looking the whole area over, and speaking with each Sasquatch in charge of the individual sections, took most of the day; Nicholas turned Valery back to the horse herd with a sigh of both pleasure and regret. He had enjoyed the gentle effort of riding, the time spent under the convincing, artificial sunlight. And yet there was only so long he could afford to spend down here, however much he wished he could spend all day of every day riding his horses, herding the cattle from one area to the next… Ah, well, at least there were days like this one.

He took his leave of Autumn, and instead of going down further levels, went up to the toy shop. Nicholas liked to spread his inspections and interviews out, though of course he spent the most time checking in on the animals and their husbandry. The lumber mill and the carpenters didn't need to see him as much; the weavers and dyers got along just fine with him keeping his clumsy fingers out of their work. But he was the boss, so of course he needed to check in at least once a quarter.

The familiar rattle and bang of the toy shop filled his ears and resonated in his chest as he stepped out of the lift. Phil caught his eye, an expression of annoyed exasperation hiding beneath a prodigious set of eyebrows and mustache.

"You have guests in your office," Phil said, his accent as close as Yeti ever got to Brooklyn. Nicholas had no idea how he managed that. "Bird lady and the shrieking one."

"I have told you not to call him that." Bunny did not appreciate his nickname. If Jack and Phil treated each other with barely restrained dislike, Phil and Bunny… Well. Phil poked, Bunny did his best to
ignore, and once a century things exploded into screaming - which, yes, got rather shrill on Bunny's end - and throwing things.

Phil grunted in reply, and moved away to supervise the packaging of dolls. Nicholas rolled his eyes, and detoured through the kitchen before making his way to the office.

He thrust the plate of gingersnaps and mini-vanilla cakes at Bunny before he could start ranting, and looked over at Tooth. "So now you bring him to me," he said. "Whatever happened to me dealing with Jack and you dealing with Bunny?"

"Oy!" Bunny looked up from the plate, and glared at them. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You are being pain in the neck," Nicholas said, before turning back to Tooth.

"I thought I'd try explaining the non-Winter perspective to Jack, while you hammered the Winter side of things into Bunny's thick skull," Tooth said, sounding exactly as exasperated as she looked, which was very. But then, she had been dealing with Bunny for nearly three weeks now, all day every day, while Jack had confined his visits to a few hours here and there.

For a moment he half-wished they could throw both idiots to Sandy, but no. Half the time, it seemed Sandy understood very little about the divisions between the seasonal spirits, while the other half of the time it seemed their wishing star friend not only understood, but enjoyed watching the conflict and negotiation.

At least in this situation, Sandy would not be much help.

"That sounds like good plan." Nicholas turned back to Bunny, who managed to look affronted while nibbling at a little cake. Pooka, so Nicholas suspected, had high energy needs, met by both eating large meals and a great deal of sugar. Tooth was certainly good for the first, but her opinion on the second was formed by someone who got baby teeth riddled with cavities. Thus the plate of sweets, which had distracted Bunny nicely enough for a few seconds.

Tooth took her leave through the window, and left Nicholas with a sullen-looking Bunny.

"Alright," Nicholas said, and sat down. He waved at one of several available seats, but Bunny chose a space on the floor, contrary thing. He'd eaten half the little cakes and a third of the cookies too. North considered calling down to the kitchens for more, and then decided against it. Time for that later.

"So." Nicholas folded his hands on his desk. "Allow me to make the summarization. You insisted on going with Jack to winter party. At party, Jack had to exercise his authority and killed an ogre threatening you and new friend Eliza. After coming home, you threw a hissy and decided to live with Tooth without telling her for a week."

"I told her!" Bunny crammed a cookie into his mouth, and spoke around the crumbs. "Her fairies thought it was great!"

"Did you tell Tooth why you threw the hissy? She was unclear."

Bunny looked sadly at the empty plate, and set it aside. "I did not throw a hissy."

"According to Tooth, you said you could not deal with a murderer right now and would appreciate her hospitality, and then hissed at Jack when he came looking for you. She said you sounded like sad and pathetic cat." Which was, perhaps, pushing the comparison Tooth had made a little bit, but Nicholas knew how stubborn Bunny was. Bandits were not known for their patience; saints might
have been, but Nicholas was only named for one, it didn't make him one.

He might as well annoy Bunny into admitting everything. It'd be faster.

Of course, he thought, there was a fine line between annoying Bunny into talking, and annoying him into attacking. Nicholas decided to watch the rabbit in silence, for the moment, because those boomerangs looked very sharp. Where had they even come from? Bunny was wearing a belt… Surely weapons would have been noticeable.

Bunny eyed him, polishing cloth in one hand, a boomerang in the other, and a second on the floor by his knee. "You don't see it," he said, abruptly. While he couldn't be said to 'break the silence', as it was never silent in the Workshop, he did break the staring contest between the two of them.

"Perhaps you should elaborate," Nicholas suggested.


Yes, Nicholas had. He'd had to restrain Tooth and Sandy for half a second, their friends willing, even eager to place their selves between Jack and his over-large foe, but then Tooth was not Winter, and Sandy only honorary. Nicholas had known, and Jack had proven his expectations and then some. The ogre's execution had been neat, even stylish, without any spillover of wasted power.

"What about it bothered you?" Nicholas asked. Certainly, there were several things that came to mind, but, well. He had been of Winter for three centuries, now, most of his life. He could barely remember the thought process of before, not that his mind had changed overmuch. Just, well… it had.

"What about - Jack just killed him! Jack, North! Guy's a - a - he's practically a kid still and -"

Nicholas snorted. Hardly a child, and he was surprised Bunny would even try to make that claim. "Jack has not been on naughty list since regaining his memories. He is an adult, Bunny. Try again."

Bunny looked affronted that his simplistic ploy had been so easily shattered. Hah. Even without the Naughty and Nice lists responding only to children, North would have known Jack was an adult. His magical control was almost terrifying, it was so good, and despite his slight stature that was a man's eyes in a man's face. Besides, Bunny was a good person, a good man; he would never form the type of bond he had with Jack with a child.

"He… fine. Maybe not a kid, but still… innocent." Bunny's scowl faded, and he stared morosely at his polishing cloth. "North, this is the guy who'll throw himself into… He spent an afternoon over in Yellowknife doing splatter painting with some tinies, y'know, and he was so proud of the pictures he'd made. And it took forever to get the whole 'don't relocate native species to non-native areas' into his head. Y'know how he tried justifying that?" Bunny asked, sounding a touch aggrieved. "But they're so cute and fluffy! Yeah, 'cause that'll keep a Kiwi in America safe."

"We are speaking of flightless bird, not slang for New Zealand human?"

"You're an idiot, ya arse, of course we are!"

"I prefer to check," Nicholas said, unruffled. "Remembering your comment about septic tanks, hm?"

Bunny winced. That had been a very strange Christmas; Nicholas had spent two weeks figuring out the best spell to 'remove all septic tanks from Oz' only to find out that Australian slang had 'septic tank' meaning 'American'. Although, why Bunny had such a grudge for American tourists fifty years
back, Nicholas could not begin to guess at.

A pity no one had explained the slang before Nicholas cast the spell, but they had managed to fix it without anyone noticing the change. And as added bonus, Australian toilets no longer got clogged!

"So, if I am understanding correctly," Nicholas said, "Jack cannot be a killer because he likes things that are small and cute?"

"It's not in his makeup," Bunny growled. "Killing takes something out of you, turns you hard. You know. Jack's... he's not a killer."

As it happened, Nicholas didn't know. He had been a killer, or at least party to it, from a very young age, after all. Oh, the bandit most responsible for him, Henk One-Ear, had kept him out of the worst the bandits had done, but Nicholas couldn't even remember his first kill, he had been so young.

"I think you mean, Jack is not a deranged serial killer like most winter spirits," Nicholas said. He tilted his head to the side. "Am I right?"

Bunny scowled at him. "What's the difference?"

Good question. Nicholas leaned back in his seat, and tapped his forefingers against his mouth. How had Ombric explained it, back when Nicholas had first become the avatar for Saint Nick, bringer of presents, and thus a winter spirit?

Well, when Ombric had explained it, he had used Nicholas' own experiences, both with banditry, mercenary work, and magic. And a little bit of human psychology, though that was not what they had called it back then.

"Let us start first with what you know of human nature, Bunny, for it is important."

Bunny looked confused, and then annoyed. "You're all a bunch of bloody madmen," he grumbled, accent thickest it had been for the whole conversation. "Y' say one thing, and do a completely different other. Strewth! Half the wars in your history are all about a bunch of blokes arguing over a religious book, and the other half's 'cause some high-ranked goober lied to another high-ranked goober!"

That was at once the least accurate, and most accurate summary of human wars Nicholas had heard in quite a long time. Of course, things tended to be a bit more complicated than that - such as when one religion met another, or when a 'high-ranked goober' was... less than diplomatic with the truth. But when things were pared down to the most basic of reasoning, well... yes. Bunny was right.

"Why do you suppose that is?" he asked, instead. "Why do you think humans are so violent?"

Bunny opened his mouth to answer, and then frowned, looking pensive. "Dunno. Suppose you got a theory?"

"One of many," Nicholas agreed. "The theory I feel, in this, has most weight... Humans are predators, Bunny. Well, omnivores, but the principle applies. The earliest of humans scavenged, it is thought, but later, they hunted. And it was the best hunters and the best gatherers that had the babies, yes?"

"Trying to claim violence is bred into humans?"

"As much as cooperation is," Nicholas said, a touch wryly. Unison and conflict; you could not have one without the other, in humans, for as surely as one person found another they agreed with, there
was yet a third they dis agreed with. "I do not say violence is the natural state, but… it is part of us, yes?"

Bunny muttered something that might have been 'oars' or possibly 'orcs', but Nicholas chose to ignore him.

"It is in being civilized that violent impulses are suppressed, even removed from a person. Or, that is how it is supposed to be." Usually the violence just became ritualized; the Gladiator games, Renn fairs and their 'knights', that sort of thing. Boxing. Nicholas quite enjoyed a good bout of modern boxing.

"But?" Bunny asked, putting the one boomerang away, and moving to the second. "What's that got to do with Jack killing that ogre?"

"Humans can lose their civilization." Nicholas thought, briefly, on his youth, and flinched away. "Just as much as they can find it again." Leading a mercenary company instead of a bandit group; oh, yes, he had found his civilization again. It might not have always been a comfortable thing to wear, but having been without it… It was not something he would willingly be without ever again.

"All winter spirits, from ogres on, were humans once." Which was not so for all spirits. Hundred-year objects, like flutes that played on their own or shoes that talked, were things before becoming something more. Trees gained dryads, no one was sure how or why, they just did if they lived long enough. Some creatures were formed from belief; mer-people had not existed before sailors mistook their eyes and came up with stories, harpies and sirens had been the same. Yeti and their kin were descended from a common ancestor with humans, but were less related than chimpanzees and gorillas were.

Winter spirits, though. They were the ones who had died, and came back.

Even Jack.

Even Nicholas.

He shivered, a chill racing down the back of his neck. He could still remember the blow, the way everything had gone red and dark and pain, the snow that melted against his cheek and neck…

… and then how he had staggered to his feet hours, possibly days after, the mortal wound no longer mortal… and no longer there. He had returned to the bandit group, trounced the leader - it had been easy, the man had been terrified, one thought dead come back to life - and taken over.

Magic had come to him, then, but only after dying.

Dying changed a person. Not just in appearance, though it could do that, but in personality. For Nicholas, dying had shocked him off the path he'd been taking, turned him away from senseless violence, which was quite the difference to most winter spirits.

"North?" Bunny asked, voice quavering. "You in there, mate?"

Nicholas blinked, and drew his attention back to the matter at hand. "Apologies, my friend. I got lost in my thoughts. As I was saying. All winter spirits were human once. They have all died to become spirits."

"But," Bunny said, eyebrows drawn together across his forehead. "But… you came back."

"Yes," Nicholas agreed. "We did. But dying… it is a shock, Bunny. Not just to the body, but to the

"But what does that have to do with Jack?"

Oh, Bunny… was it refusal to see, or honest lack of understanding? "Jack is a winter spirit, Bunny. He died, and came back. It changed him. He, like I, is no longer squeamish with the violence. It is… fun," he admitted. Not that he was ashamed, precisely, but… The person he had worked so hard to become enjoyed fighting only when it was necessary.

Bunny stared at him. "Fun?" he asked. "Fun? Are you off your rocker? How many roos are loose in that paddock of yours?" His voice started to get a little shrill, and the whites showed around his eyes. "Fighting's not fun, North!"

"Not for you. But for winter spirits… Fighting, bloodshed, it is… it is addictive. Bunny, look at me."

He waited until the Pooka was focused on him, though Bunny panted like a dog that had been stressed. Poor fellow. Nicholas leaned forward across the desk.

"You know addiction," he said. "Chocolate, you have said this, it makes you feel powerful. So too does violence for we of winter."

Bunny shuddered and looked away. "But you - and Jack - you don't - you don't. You -"

"We do." It hurt to say, an almost physical wrench deep in the chest. Admitting one's weaknesses was ever so. "But, as you control yourself and refrain from chocolate…" He shrugged. He could not say he refrained from violence, because he did not. And Jack, well… Jack was respected, a little feared, among the winter spirits. There was only one way to become so.

"We cannot cut it out of our diets," he said, instead, "We control it. Direct it. If I must enjoy fighting, then I shall enjoy fighting the enemies of children!"

"And Jack?" Bunny asked, in a small voice. His ears hung down to his shoulders, but there was something dispirited in the pose, not relaxed.

Nicholas sighed. "I cannot speak for him. But… He enjoys things other than violence, does he not?" He waited for Bunny's nod. Of course Jack enjoyed things other than violence; he was the Guardian of Fun, how could he not? He was snowball fights and sleigh rides and skating; he was becoming lazy days curled up warm in an armchair with a mug of hot cocoa and a good book. If it brought joy to children, then Jack was interested.

"Only he can explain how he has conquered the usual winter violence." If, indeed, Jack had - but Nicholas would not bring up that possibility with Bunny. "But with General Winter's party… Bunny, what do you think would have happened to that ogre if Jack had not frozen him?"

Think, he mentally urged his friend. A party for winter spirits, a party where violence was forbidden, where one guest had harmed another… a party of sharks and then there had been blood in the water.

"He'd have died anyways, that it?" Bunny asked, suddenly resigned.

"Eventually. When they tired of his pain." Blunt, yes, but honest. Nicholas met Bunny's horrified expression with his own, calm one. "They are predators, Bunny. Like cats, playing with their food."

It would likely have taken the ogre days to die, days spent as the main entertainment for the party. Intellectually he understood, of course; in such a volatile group, the consequences for breaking the
rules had to be horrific, so ever there was the thought of 'let this never be me'. Emotionally, though… perhaps he just was not much of a winter spirit, he felt no anticipation, no pleasure at the idea of torturing an enemy to death. It was not something that was in him.

Bunny ducked his head, but there was amusement in his voice when he spoke next. "Did you just call yourself a cat, mate?"

Bah, allergies… "No. More like the trained dog for attacking and guarding, triggered by word or action but otherwise trusted family pet. And yes," he added, because Bunny was snickering at him, "I just called myself a dog."

"No one more worthy," Bunny said, and snickered some more. Nicholas waited it out, patient as a mountain, until Bunny's mirth faded and he sobered once more.

"You think that's what Jack's like? Dog instead of cat?"

As analogies went, Nicholas felt that this one was probably one of his best, as long as the cat was a feral, nasty beast. "I cannot say. I know for myself, but for Jack… ask him."

Bunny cringed, and looked away. "Doubt he wants to talk to me."

He didn't roll his eyes, but it was oh so tempting. "Ah, so you will make use of your room here, wonderful! I will have the elves air it out, fresh sheets, it will be lovely!"

Bunny looked a little wild about the eyes again, and pressed back into the wall. "Oy! Maybe I wanna live with Tooth!"

"In the humidity? I thought you hated it?"

"Well, but - it's quieter! And there's some nice flowers -"

"You must see the hydroponics garden!"

"Birdsong," Bunny blurted. "Lots of birdsong, really nice, been meaning to take up birdwatching for yonks now -"

Nicholas all but rubbed his hands together. "Chickens," he said. "You must, Bunny, if you wish to watch the birds with our chickens you must start. They are the most beautiful of birds, my friend!"

"You're starkers," Bunny growled.

He deliberately misunderstood. "But Bunny! I am dressed!"

The Pooka groaned, and shook his head. "Talk to Jack, huh?" he asked, after a minute of sullen glowering.

"Yes," Nicholas said, sobering. "It has been long enough, and he is worried for you." He hesitated, because really, what Jack had said was under confidence, but… "He doesn't even know what you are upset about."

"But it's obvious."

"To you," Nicholas said, as gently as he could. "To anyone not of winter. But to us… I am older than Jack by some few years, and even I am sometimes unsure when violence is proper and when it is not."
Bunny looked down at the floor, and grunted. "I, uh, guess I should check in on him, then," he mumbled.

"Yes," Nicholas said. "And Bunny? If... If this is something you cannot live with in your housemate... be gentle with Jack, yes?"

Chapter End Notes

I promised you a long chapter, and it's long. And I promised you an aftermath - time skip, but it's fairly basic. Bunny just moved out for a little bit while in shock. Also, North's POV is fun.
Aster paused, one hand on the gazebo post. For the first time in what felt like a while, he took a good, long look at the place he'd been living.

There was the gazebo, of course; it blended into its surroundings, pale pine-wood posts and birch railings, a patch of ground in the middle cleared away for the permanent tunnel mouth. Benches, in more pale wood - some kind he couldn't recognize straight off, either because it wasn't often used in furniture or because of how it'd been treated - ringed the tunnel along the railing. He'd planted flowers around the base of the gazebo, bright and cheerful things that bloomed in stages throughout the year.

Their Christmas tree grew in lone splendour nearby, looking much better than it had when they first got it; taller, too. If Jack couldn't fly, getting the star up top would've been a challenge. A hollow in the trunk, formed by a knot and a branch torn away some years back in a storm, had been taken over by an aged squirrel Jack had relocated to his domain.

The grass was growing well, the taller stalks showing the beginnings of flowers. Off around the corner he could just make out the kitchen garden, looking well. The house itself… Jack must have washed the windows and done something to the door, because both the glass and the wood gleamed. Home, he thought and pressed a hand to the ache in his chest. He'd missed it.

He crossed the lawn, and made a mental note to bring out stepping stones some time. The grass was getting worn down, and if he was going to take the same path every time, might as well mark it.

What had North meant, if he couldn't live with Jack? He - well, yes, running off and hiding at Tooth's hadn't been all that mature or reasonable, but it'd been a shock. Anyone would need time to regroup and readjust after that. One minute he'd been glowering at a living ignoramus; the next, Jack had frozen the idiot solid and then the body was shattered into so much frozen meat.

And even then… would he have reacted so strongly if it'd been someone else doing the killing? Any other winter spirit, of course they were crazed killers, he'd pointed out as much to Jack before the party…

And Jack had argued he was just as dangerous as any other winter spirit. Aster hadn't listened. Because of course Jack wasn't dangerous, he was Jack. El-Ahrairah alone knew that Jack didn't know the first thing when it came to fighting people. Storms, sure, but he'd probably break his own hand throwing a punch.

Yet…

Aster shook his head, and opened the door.

His first thought was that the room was empty and Jack gone. The fireplace was cold, nothing but ashes and dead coals, and while the sun shone in through the windows, it seemed gloomy despite the bright light. He shivered, and his thoughts went immediately to his studio, or the bedroom; had no idea whether he wanted to curl up in his egg-chair or under the covers.

And then a shadow in one of the chairs, Jack's chair, moved and became a white-haired waif with
"Jack," Aster said, and let the door close behind him.

Jack stared at him, his eyes impossibly big, his expression one of miserable confusion. "Why'd you leave?" he asked, skipping to the important part.

Aster would have preferred they ignored the important part for a while, but supposed that wasn't an option. "It's... complicated," he said, and crossed the room to his chair. He sat down, and stared into the cold fireplace.

"Un-complicate it," Jack snapped, teeth clicking together.

Sure. He didn't even understand his reaction, but he could explain it to Jack, right? Of course. Simple as pie.

But where to start?

"You're not like them," he blurted, and was rewarded with the strangest, confused-amused-dubious-exasperated expression he'd ever seen. "The other winter spirits. They get their jollies torturing kittens to death or something, you throw snowballs and make snowmen. I know you fight storms, but..."

"I fight people, too," Jack grumbled.

"But I never saw it. And then you just - talk about strangling and - he was frozen solid, Jack. It took seconds." Aster looked up, and the winter spirit didn't look any less confused, though the amusement and exasperation had faded away. "In all the time I've known you, you've never been violent. Or vicious."

Jack opened his mouth, and then paused, gaze distant. When he finally spoke, he sounded thoughtful. "Tooth said most people don't default to violence, to solve their problems."

"No," Aster agreed. "It takes training. Soldiers, mostly."

Jack drummed his fingers against the chair arm. Then he settled, and leveled a serious expression on Aster. "Since you've moved in with me, I've killed seventeen winter spirits, not including the party."

Killed... what?

"I don't fight close in, like North and you, I guess. I ice people over. I hit 'em with it. I don't throw punches, but I can slam them around pretty well. And half the time I'm called out to deal with a winter problem, it's dealing with someone who needs killed."

Killed. Something deep inside trembled and cracked. Jack killed. "But," he said, sounding plaintive to his own ears. "But... but you're not like that."

Jack took a deep breath, and then held it. He let it out slowly, eyes closed, lips moving as he mouthed what seemed to be swearwords. He repeated the process several more times before opening his eyes and looking at Aster. "Bunny. I kind of am."

Aster opened his mouth, because no - no, Jack wasn't like them, the other winter spirits, he - and Jack cut him off.

"I am winter, Bunny. I am like that, deep inside. I died, I walked through the valley, and came back
different. And I'm always going to have a little fascination with death because of it."

Fascination - North had explained it differently. Where did fascination with death come into it?

But Jack was still talking. "I don't want to die. I'd rather not be the cause of anyone else dying. Just because I can kill doesn't mean I - I don't want to enjoy it. But."

"What… do you mean? Enjoy it?"

Jack swallowed, and looked away. "Part of… part of the winter experience is, uh, having a thing for controlling other people, I guess. What's more powerful than control over the time and way someone dies?"

"Jack." Aster leaned forward, and tried to catch Jack's eye. "What do you mean, enjoy it?"

"It's hard to explain." Jack finally looked at him again, and there was something in his eyes that… made it easier to believe this man was a killer. There was an exhaustion there, unique to soldiers, in Aster's experience.

There was no way to reconcile Jack with the psychotic killers that had attended General Winter's party. But a soldier… it was possible, right now, to see that.

"Try," he asked.

Jack looked away, nostrils twitching, and then back at Aster again. "I'm good at what I do," he said. "When they don't want to argue, people - winter people - listen to me. If I smash a few heads together, I can usually solve things without violence. And when I do kill, it's because there's really and honestly no other option. Like the party - either I killed him fast, or the party killed him slow and painful."

"North… mentioned that," Aster said.

Jack shrugged. "They're like piranha," he said. "They forgot what little humanity they had when they came back, so… swarm of meat-eating crazy people. Who are all… respectful, of me."

"And what, they only respect violence?" It made sense, and Jack had been so fast to kill the ogre, but…

Soldier, Aster, he reminded himself. Soldiers did things. He would know.

"Violence and power," Jack agreed. "I have the second in spades, apparently - don't ask me," he added, one hand up as though to physically stop questions Aster didn't, actually, have. "I don't know. Apparently I'm powerful, I don't actually use my magic that much, how they can tell… I don't know. But the violence…"

He sighed, and picked at his cuticles. "When I first woke up, you know, as a spirit… I'd get called here and there, and no clue what to do. Showing up, the winter spirits involved attacked me. And I fought back… instinct. And the spirits attacking me usually died, if they didn't run away first."

"Jack..." Aster reached over, and wrapped his hand around Jack's. "Mate, I..."

"What, you wish you could've helped? Wouldn't have been much you could've done, Bunny. Trust me. But I got a reputation from it. And now..." Jack shrugged, his grip tight enough to bruise Aster's fingers. "Well, I have to keep it. I don't play with my... victims. That's part of it."
"And you enjoy… not playing."

"I enjoy being good at what I do." Jack's smile had no humour in it; it looked wrong. Aster reached over and tried to smooth it away. "I enjoy… being able to lay down the law and be listened to. Sometimes, if I've had a bad day or week or… whatever… I enjoy having an acceptable target to smash my fist into.

"I don't enjoy being feared."

Dangerous, Jack had said, back before the party. When Aster had panicked at the thought of his friend, so small and fragile, among the big, bad winter spirits. He hadn't thought that Jack had survived three centuries on his own, dealing with them, or how he'd done it.

"North… He compared himself to a guard dog. One of the well trained ones you'd trust with a rug rat, but hell on earth if set off."

Jack pressed his cheek a little more firmly against Aster's palm. "Best explanation I've heard for it in a while. Are you still angry with me?"

Angry?

"I wasn't angry," Aster said, and got out of the chair. He knelt down beside Jack, and leaned over until he could rest his forehead on the winter spirit's chest. "Confused, upset… unable to come to terms with what I saw. But not angry."

Jack rested his hands on Aster's shoulders. "So… you're home again?"

"Yeah." Strewth, he'd fucked up. "I'm home again."

Chapter End Notes

Really sorry about the short chapter guys, but the next segment is a) super-long and doesn't have any good breaks, and b) half of the next segment is still on my work computer. -rolls eyes-
Jack made sure to tiptoe around Bunny for the next few days. Tooth had given him quite the talking to; fair pinned his ears back as good as his dad's mum had. She'd pointed out - loudly and with a fruit knife for emphasis - that Bunny, as a former soldier, had issues with violence. That he'd fought a war against fearlings and nightmares and other nasties, then when it'd all seemed over had to turn around and fight another one against fearlings and nightmares led by Pitch, making it that much worse. The last thing Bunny had needed, while in a situation that already had him on edge, was seeing Jack be so casual about killing.

There'd been other things, guest rights and human psychology and how winter spirits didn't have safety catches anymore - though what gun safety had to do with keeping the monsters in line, Jack didn't know - but he'd at least picked up on the important things.

Jack knew about PTSD, after all; Mr. Bennett, Lieutenant Bennett, had come back from Afghanistan with shaking hands and a hatred for loud noises. Jack was always very careful instigating snowball fights in the backyard now, and he was a little proud of that. He hadn't always been so careful, looking back.

Bunny was miles and years ahead of Mr. Bennett with the recovery thing, but PTSD wasn't something you were rid of after a certain period of time. Of course Bunny wouldn't take the whole killing thing well! Jack - well, he hadn't known, not about the Bunny-as-soldier thing, but still. He should've handled things better.

He still would've killed the ogre, of course, but… handled better, for sure.

On day four, Bunny collared him and dragged him back to the studio. "Sit," he said, and gave him a gentle shove towards the egg chair. "Questions for you."

Questions were probably better than the cautious small talk they'd indulged in before now, but they promised to be difficult. "Okay," he said, and curled up in the chair. If he was going to be interrogated, he might as well be comfortable during it.

Bunny shifted his weight back and forth, from foot to foot, and then sat down at his drawing table. Jack got a little more comfortable; Bunny's fur was fluffed up like he was feeling a draft, but Jack had been over the walls with clay and moss the day before, so that wasn't possible.

Nothing like filling in chinks and cracks in the walls to avoid conversation.

"What's nominal winter compared to fully winter?" Bunny asked, and then made a face. Must not have been the question he wanted to ask first… but Jack would take it.

"Oh, that's easy," he chirped. Bunny looked a little disgruntled, but also curious. "Fully winter is someone like me - snow, ice, died and came back, the full shebang."

"She-what now?"

Jack paused, and then shrugged. "Slang. Basically, fully winter means you tick all the boxes. Snow or ice or cold in general, check. Died and came back, check. Cannibalistic, check. Nominal can only check one or two of the boxes - Wendigo don't die, if I remember right, but they are cannibals. Some
spirits considered death-spirits are nominally winter, because they died and came back. And so on."

Bunny gave him an odd look. "You're not cannibalistic."

"Um." Jack grimaced. "Technically? Energy cannibal, not flesh cannibal." Bunny just looked more confused. "Bunny, please don't tell me I need to explain the theory of heat energy to you, I barely understand it myself."

"Maybe you need it explained. Heat is just the energy given off by molecules vibrating, and... oh. You can steal that?"

"Absorb, maybe." Jack shrugged. "Simplest way to drop a temperature is draw in all the energy. It gets cold; draw exceeds the output, yadda yadda and blah freaking blah, energy for me that I don't need to get through eating or sleeping, and stuff freezes." He paused, and added, "Can't do it to flesh and blood, though. Just, uh, atmosphere. Air. Plants, well, leaves frosting."

"I get the idea," Bunny said, his fur smoothing out some. "Is that really cannibalism, though?"

"Apparently. It counts, anyways." Half the time Jack never even realized he was doing it, and it counted. "A lot of weather spirits are nominally winter because of it. They can only do that energy cannibalism thing - maybe because the energy goes into us and not, y'know, moved to another part of the atmosphere?"

Bunny nodded. "So, when Eliza said she was nominally winter?"

"Cannibal spirit, though that was more what people believed of her in life than anything she's done since death." Nothing like gossip to get one up to date on the various spirits. Eliza really was a vegetarian, with a side of scaring hapless campers on her mountain in autumn. "Also, she died and came back."

Bunny nodded again, and eased back in his seat. "Alright. I can see that. And, uh, how come everyone... was watching you? Like you were a magnet and their eyes were iron fillings."

That was a gruesome enough imagery to be from someone winter, but maybe Jack was just thinking bloody again. "It's a power thing," he said, and shrugged. "I dunno, I ignore rank, so they can't really..." He settled on an eloquent hand gesture, since words failed him. "And I'm apparently strong enough that if I didn't ignore rank, I could still ignore rank, so."

Bunny squinted at him, and then snorted. "You mean you'd be head of the season if you wanted to."

"Well," Bunny stammered. "Good. Don't." He paused, and added with some horror in his voice, "You've never done that to anyone else, have you?"

Jack rubbed the bridge of his nose. Right, PTSD, soldiers, fighting... "No," he said. Thank goodness, no. "I don't do the torture thing. I mean," he added, because honesty, "There's been a few times helping people involved skin loss, but that was more a 'pull them off the very cold thing before it killed them' situation than anything. And I guess there'd be a spirit somewhere who'd be into that as a kink, but I think I'd run away very, very fast... ew."
"With you there, mate," Bunny said. He relaxed again, having gone tense from Jack's... example of how much he wanted to lead the other winter spirits. "So, uh," he said, looking almost nervous again. Jack carefully didn't sigh, though he really wanted to. Hopefully things would go back to normal soon; he didn't like how hesitant Bunny was being.

Sure, he understood why - thanks, Tooth - but that didn't mean he liked it.

"If you're able to ignore the rules," Bunny said, eyebrows furrowed together, "why'd Snow Queen give you hypothermia? And how'd she manage it anyways?"

"Energy cannibalism," Jack said, and shrugged. At least, that was his best guess, anyways; if that was how she'd done it, the Snow Queen could obviously drain energy from people, not just atmosphere. It would explain her frozen statues, at least. "And there's always jockeying for position, y'know. That's what the party was about."

"Snow Queen tried to kill you for a position you didn't even want?" Bunny asked, looking rather more horrified than he sounded. Jack shrugged, and then nodded. "Is she insane?"

He tried not to, really, but the giggle slipped out anyways. Bunny glared. "Cottontail, weren't you ranting about that before the party? Yeah, she's insane. They're all insane. Even I'm probably not quite... solidly sane, y'know?"

"You're not a nutter," Bunny protested.

Jack rolled his eyes. "Not the way you're thinking of - come on, do you know anyone else who steals school calendars just to plot out the best days to dump snow on them? Or, you know, animates snowmen just to have a real-world musical dance... thing?"

Bunny's expression switched to unimpressed so fast, his eyebrows probably got whiplash. "I thought we agreed that wasn't happening again?"

"What you don't know can't give you wonky dreams," Jack grinned. "Besides, the kids loved it. I'm Mr. White Christmas, I'm Mr. Snow," he warbled. Bunny mimed a blow at him. "There. I'm just harmless in my eccentricity."

With the occasional side of talking to himself, he supposed, but he'd all but stopped once Bunny had moved in. So that probably didn't count anymore.

"I don't consider your singing harmless," Bunny grumbled, but he got up from his seat and crossed the room, apparently just to pull Jack into a hug. "Well. I reckon we'll be alright now, Frostbite."

"No more leaving?" Jack asked, snuggling into Bunny's chest.

He glanced up in time to see an odd expression cross Bunny's face, but then then Pooka shrugged and nodded. Well, whatever that was about, it probably wasn't important.

"Good," he decided, and went back to snuggling. "I missed you."

"Missed you too," Bunny said, arms tightening around Jack's shoulders.

Jack continued to act strangely hesitant for approximately a week; Aster appreciated the quiet for all of one day before it started to annoy him. In a fit of what he'd later insist was insanity, he set a trap - everyone else called it a prank - that ended with Jack's hair dyed bright, neon orange and pink.
The resulting back and forth of pranks went on until the next Easter. Aster stuck with what he knew best; snares and trip wires that set off explosions of paint and coloured powders. Jack was a little more creative, doing everything from switching the sugar and salt - which backfired, Aster found he liked salt in his tea, and sugar sprinkled on his food - to changing out the lenses on his reading glasses for ones of the same strength, but a different coloured tint. The aquamarine had made Aster feel a bit seasick while wearing them.

Aster rearranged the furniture, but only enough for Jack to start tripping and knocking into things, not enough for him to really notice. It was amazing how disorienting shifting a chair an inch, and a bed two inches, could be.

Jack, when he figured it out, responded by replacing all of Aster's nightgowns with… well, they were still nightgowns, but they were filmy, silky things that were probably some kind of lingerie. They were rather risqué, at least compared to the flannel nightgowns. As a prank, it fell far short, as Aster had no problems going to sleep in bare fur… which was when the second half of the prank came to light.

He woke up to a kudzu vine woven through his fur.

Aster's magic was drained, and even when he'd had more of it, it'd been more about waking plants than helping them grow, but kudzu was kudzu and it'd gotten well and truly stuck on him… and the bed… the bedside table… and a fair portion of the wall and floor. A single vine had tried winding through Jack's hair; the leaves had gone a brilliant gold fading to red at the edges.

Jack returned Aster's usual nightgowns. Aster took to wearing a hastily made set of trousers and long-sleeved tunic, to hide the bald patches where they'd had to cut away chunks of fur.

Jack threw Aster to the elves for a proper wardrobe; Aster threatened to do the same, but instead left Jack with a pack of ten-year-old first-time campers. Jack was two weeks before he escaped, and he came back with a thorough knowledge of modern campfire songs, an arm covered in friendship bracelets, and a tendency to wince at the sight of a hotdog.

The pranking only died off when North and Tooth threatened to join in. Sandy - who Aster suspected of following them around with bags of popcorn - mimed disappointment, but didn't argue.

If there was any other fallout from General Winter's party, Aster was unaware of it. Jack was out several times immediately after, sometimes not coming home for a day or two, but he came back undamaged. Considering how fast he healed, that didn't exactly mean much, but on reflection Aster decided he didn't really want to know about any fighting.

Easter went well, and as if in a final gesture towards their prank war, Jack snuck his first believers into the Warren to help with preparations… and a party, after. Aster was fairly certain he amused the kids by falling asleep halfway through. When he woke up, a few hours later, he was covered in slightly wilted flower crowns and Jack was smiling down at him, equal parts fond and amused.

He continued wearing the clothes the elves made him, clothes that had been made per his design sketches. It wasn't exactly harder to run on all fours while wearing them - Pookan design tended to take that sort of thing into account - but he didn't really feel the need to go racing around, either.

Aster enjoyed the different reactions people had when they saw him, the double-takes and the new respect. If he occasionally heard Jack's name paired with wary glances in his direction, it was easy enough to put out of his mind.

Besides, there had to be some kind of benefit, being friends with the unofficial head of winter.
And now we enter another time skip, woo! Anyways, so is Jack right, was Bunny affected by PTSD? Maybe. Bunny wouldn't think so. But considering he figured living like a wild animal was a good idea, I think it's fairly safe to say he doesn't necessarily have the best reactions to things.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two years after General Winter's party, Jack's summer - north of the equator - became taken up by hurricanes. Not fighting them, but steering them. The first of the storms began in late May, and the last hit land with the dawn of November's last day. Jack got little rest, but instead of exhausting him, the storms seemed to energize him. It certainly made the northern winter interesting that year; snow threatened to continue falling well past Easter, though for some reason, somehow, a break in the clouds happened just in time. The eggs might have been hidden in snow knee deep in places, but the temperature was almost balmy and the kids seemed to enjoy biting into near-frozen chocolate.

"Don't worry, Bunny," Jamie said; the kid was turning into a young giant, currently lanky and awkward with his sudden height. "Easter Chocolate tastes best when it's either fresh or just out of the freezer. This way, it's both."

Summer, at least, settled down, and Aster took to spending entire days in the Warren, slowly getting back into fighting shape. Stretching, mostly, at least to start. He'd let himself get all stiff and creaky, had to work the kinks out.

Jack, amusingly, pretended indifference, as if he wasn't fiendishly curious about what Aster was up to. He knew, because Sandy, then North, and finally Tooth all made sure to visit the Warren and tell him all about Jack's increasingly elaborate attempts at showing how he didn't know and didn't care to know what Aster was up to.

It was enough to make a cat howl with hilarity, and cats, for the most part, clung to their dignity. Aster cared about his dignity quite a bit less, so it was hard to stop giggling in time for dinner.

Jack didn't find out before Easter came and went again; after the spring thaw this year, thank goodness, so there wasn't any snow. While the sprogs didn't help with making the eggs, they did throw another gathering-party after, and this time he managed to stay awake though the whole thing. While Aster found it a bit odd, still being seen by teenagers, he managed to bury the strangeness and simply enjoy the company.

For a second summer in a row, Aster had almost daily visits to his Warren. Sandy, most usually, the dreamweaver not only sharing gossip about Jack's antics, but helping to correct Aster's form as he moved from just stretching to basic katatas. Sandy had known Pooka warriors at some point; Aster had suspected, but not known for sure, until now. It had to have been members of the Brotherhood several generations older than Aster, as Sandy's corrections moved the forms to a more archaic version, which was a bit of a shock. He'd known Sandy was old, but he'd thought they were contemporaries, not... well.

Jack still hadn't figured Aster's activities out before the northern winter began again, and it... it was a horror.

It started simply enough; a Kokogiak, a ten-legged polar bear known to the Eskimos, managed to cross the boundary between the spirit and mortal realms and started trying to create havoc. Unfortunately for the Kokogiak, humans had developed guns since it'd become a spirit, and from what Aster understood, every Eskimo knew how to use one, the way they'd used to use spears. Jack was more annoyed by the idiot bear's work than anything, but it heralded the coming trouble.
While scientists and politicians argued about the Kokogiak - apparently it was classified a mutant, and declared a sign of how badly polluted the oceans were - other spirits were trying to duplicate the Kokogiak's achievement. Jack was worn out darting from one glacier to the next, stopping attempted crossovers, sometimes only barely in time.

There were weeks where Jack didn't come home, and when he did show up, it was for an hour here, two hours there, enough time to snatch a quick snack and wash the blood off, but no more. By the time spring thaw came around and the Arctic spirits settled down into thwarted petulance - even the 'good' ones, the sorts that helped humans more than hunted them - Jack had lost twenty pounds he couldn't afford to do without, and was healing barely faster than a human.

"I wasn't using the authority," Jack had tried to explain, before passing out. Aster ended up hauling Jack to the Warren with him for Easter prep, filling a small dip in the ground with pillows and blankets for Jack to sleep in while Aster worked. Even singing to wake the Warren and the eggplants didn't wake Jack up, which should have been a relief, not a disappointment.

North, thankfully, stepped in and helped out with the preparations that year; Aster was just a touch distracted. North's calm, and the second set of hands, did wonders for Aster's peace of mind. Even if he did have to keep North from turning the eggs into an ode to red and green and Christmas trees.

Jack woke properly after Easter, and moved like an old man who'd just come in from the cold. He ate like a bear just out of hibernation, to the point that they had to restock their food stores at the Workshop; they just couldn't get enough food through trade.

Fortunately, the southern winter was mild.

So was the following winter, to Aster's relief. Jack was able to focus all his attention on steering gentle snowstorms around, bringing snow days to schools and snowball fights to parks. Most of those snowball fights happened in Burgess. Jack's first believers - sans Sophie - were going to graduate college, and he wanted their final year to be as magical as could be. Since he couldn't do much about exams, beyond snow them out, Jack did what he could for the sledding, skating, snowboarding, and turned the forest into a magical, ice-gilt wonderland.

"Would it be weird to go to their graduation?" Jack asked, late one night. Aster, mostly asleep, grunted. "I mean, they still believe…"

Believers. Right. It was night why was Jack talking about this now? "When they walk?" he grumbled, mostly muffled by the pillow.

"Late May. A full month after Easter."

"Fine. We'll go. Sleep now."

Aster finally pulled his pillow over his head, trying to muffle the sounds of Jack's chuckles. It worked, somewhat.

He still stole Jack's morning cup of tea, just on principle.

"What's with the nerves?" Jack asked. He adjusted Jamie's bowtie, nodded, and threatened the young man's hairstyle with a comb.

Aster, well out of the way and lounging on the bed, watched with interest. Cupcake and Pippa were in Sophie's room, getting ready, with Tooth's help; the boys had gathered together in Jamie's room, which was rather crowded as a result. North and Sandy had bowed out of the pre-graduation
preparations. Probably setting up for the party after, but Aster wasn't supposed to know about that. "Reasons. Going to start that charity." Jamie pulled away from the comb, and thrust Monty into the line of fire. "There's going to be a lot of believers in the audience."

"We'll stay at the back." Jack adjusted Monty's jacket; the blond submitted tamely to the fussing. "So, charity? First I've heard of it…"

Caleb - distinguished from his twin Claude by his cornrows, while Claude had patterns shaved into his clipped hair - grinned. "Oh, you'll love it," he said. "Remember how you keep asking for charitable donations each Christmas?"

"Hard to forget," Jack said, turning to Claude, who promptly ducked out of the way and shoved his twin forwards. Caleb turned and swatted at Claude, who fought back, and the whole thing could have ended in the ruin of their neon-green and pink tuxedos - and good riddance - but Jack stepped in and hauled them apart.

"Charitable donations?" Jack asked, brushing both boys off. Young men now, Aster supposed, but he still saw gap-toothed ankle biters when he looked at them.

Strewth. They were adults. And still believed…

"Burgess isn't going to be like Santoff Clausen, is it?" he asked, getting odd looks from everyone but Jamie. Suspicious, that.

"If I knew what you were referencing, I'd be able to answer," Jack said. "Charitable donations?"

"Ombric's place. Everyone there can see spirits."

"Probably won't happen," Pippa said, entering the room. Tooth and Cupcake followed close on her heels. Aster found himself sandwiched between those two, on the bed, Tooth all but cuddled up on his lap. "Burgess isn't some hidden elf village."

"There aren't any elves," Aster protested. For some reason it made the kids laugh.

Jack smirked, and edged through the small crowd to ruffle the fur between Aster's ears. "You're adorable," he said, and turned to Cupcake. "Charitable donations?"

"Charitable donations to you," she said, and laughed when he made a face. "It was Jamie's idea."

"Here," Jamie said, and ruffled through a pile of papers on his desk. After a moment, he held up a colourful paper, and handed it over.

Jack was still close enough that Aster could see the paper over his shoulder. After half a second, he pulled out his glasses and put them on. The top of the paper was blazoned with a blue and white heading. "Jack Frost Sweaters and Scarves Event!"

The information below stated a time - last month - and place, a donation goal, with a promise of free cider and cupcakes with every donation of money or warm clothes.

"What," Jack said, the paper frosting over. Aster rescued it; Jack didn't seem to notice. "You started a charity?"

"Under your name," Jamie said, looking smug. "Last year of high school. I'm going to run it full time, now I've got my degree."
"You have a business degree," Aster pointed out.

"Specialty in non-profit, which this is." He grinned, and poked Jack in the forehead.

Jack blinked, recoiled, and flailed his way down onto Aster's lap. Aster sighed, but he supposed grace was a bit much to ask for.

"You started a charity in my name!" Jack pushed himself upright, mostly, though he was still in Aster's lap. After a moment's thought, he slung an arm around the winter spirit's waist, to keep him from tumbling to the floor. "How's it going, anyways?"

"Pretty good, we ran out of cider and cupcakes last time." This time Pippa tapped Jack on the forehead. "We figured you'd have a hard time handing out treats to adults, so this way you can join in even when you can't."

"Aw..." Jack went limp, and would have slid to the floor but for Aster catching him. "You guys... What'm I gonna do with you, huh?"

"Right now, you can skedaddle," Monty said. He checked his watch. "We've got just enough time to get down to the university, guys. Seriously, great seeing you, now go away."

Aster muffled his snickers in Jack's hair, and nodded. "C'mon, Frostbite, they gotta get going."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so. Because the author (hi!) can't tell time, this was almost the kid's high school graduation, which... no. That would make them the oldest high school students in history, I suspect. So, college. With various degrees and various plans of going on to further education or not. (The author was also considering making Jamie a priest, but it didn't work out. So he'll likely just become legal to marry people and skip the religious aspects of it.

Also, I warned you guys it's slow burn. It's currently 217 pages in word. (195 in Google Docs, but it's a lying liar who lies.) We're still nowhere near close to the realization of love, never mind the confessions. -grin- Enjoy.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The graduation ceremony was boring, as these things usually were. Aster kept one arm over Jack’s shoulders, and the other over Tooth’s, so he was bracketed by sniffling people who were not crying, Bunny, shut up despite the tears. The college… probably not principal, but that was the only word coming to mind… Well, whatever his title, he liked the sound of his voice. It’d been an hour and he was still going.

Aster tilted an ear towards North as the man came in and sat down on Tooth’s other side. With a glance, a smirk, and a sigh, Aster managed to transfer Tooth’s sniffling from his shoulder to North’s.

"How long is this supposed to take?" North asked, gesturing up at the podium. "You hand out diplomas, you say good job, and then party. Not this… droning."

Tooth sniffed, and pouted up at him. "Oh hush, it's an important day."

Aster made a face, and eyed Sandy hopefully. In answer, the dreamweaver scooted away several inches. Jack wiped his eyes on Aster’s shoulder. That was… pleasant.

Up on the stage, the kids at least were having fun. There were grins and badly-hidden snickers, and while it was ridiculous to think it, Aster couldn't help but feel the laughter was at him. And Jack. Sniffling on his shoulder. Like some kind of… he didn’t even know what. At least it was his shirt getting damp and not his fur.

Strewth but clothes were right useful.

The college - head, maybe - finally stopped talking, one hour and twenty-three minutes (and forty-seven seconds, but who was counting?) after he’d started, and… oh, no, it was someone else's turn to talk. Aster sighed, and resigned himself to a damp shoulder and a numb tail.

Finally, finally, the Chatty Cathies started handing out rolls of paper. College students, at least half of whom kept looking at the back of the auditorium like they couldn't believe their eyes, took the rolls of paper. After the seventh incredulous look, Jack stopped sniffing and started waving at the kids, cheeky grin and red-rimmed eyes.

Aster resisted the urge to push him off onto the floor, but only just.

The ceremony finished with everyone tossing their funny-looking caps in the air. Jack eyed the proceedings with a faintly jittery air, and then turned to Aster.

"I'm going to go photobomb everyone," he said, and launched into the air before anyone could stop him.

"Does that mean snowballs?" Aster asked. Sandy showed a Jack-figure throwing snowballs at unsuspecting graduates and their families, which wasn't exactly helpful. Tooth and North just shrugged, the both of them absolutely useless. Aster rolled his eyes, and then waved at Sophie where she was clapping Jamie on the back. And sticking a sign there, drat the girl; drat Jack's influence too, at that.

The kids, Jack's little core of believers, were good enough to move to the edge of the gathering so
North could weave in and out of the crowd without harm, whispering directions to meet at Jack's lake. Sophie caught Aster's eye and winked, then nodded. Good girl.

The sign on Jamie's back, he noticed, said "still a goofball". Definitely Jack to blame for that one.

Aster shook his head, and dropped down into a tunnel. He'd meet the kids at the lake. He did pause and look around once underground, though. The tunnel was bigger. He could walk upright if he so pleased. That was... different. The main tunnels were always that big - bigger, really - but the small, magic-bound ones weren't.

Well, it saved him loping around on all fours in his reasonably good clothing. They were just a bit more restrictive than the everyday things.

He meandered down the tunnel, studying the changes. Instead of being circular, the tunnel had stretched out overhead, creating a more ovoid shape, more like an egg. The walls weren't smooth, though; there were chunks of rock and earth jutting out, hollows the size of his two fists together, and apart from the very bottom of the tunnel, rather rugged. The bottom of the tunnel was soft loam, while the sides were covered in moss and ferns and tufts of ornamental grasses, and the first fragile flowers of spring.

The ferns and moss were familiar and had been in the tunnels since just after he dug the first one. The grasses and flowers, however, were new.

Hyacinth flowers in shades of white, purple, and a purple-red, mixed with crocuses and snowdrops and several wildflowers: violet pulsatilla patens, yellow calypso orchids, and bleeding hearts tinted a soft pink. The leaves ranged in shades of green, while the grasses added yellows and touches of blue and white. It was beautiful, no lie, especially with shafts of light spearing down through chinks in the roof - despite, of course, the fact that the tunnels were all well underground.

He just hadn't done any of the adjustments, the flowers or the height or any of it.

Magic, he thought, suddenly uneasy. He really needed to start studying his own. Apparently, his magic wasn't as scant as he'd originally thought. Or... well, maybe not scant, the tunnels were pretty much self-sustaining, but it was a change.

A nice change. It all looked even brighter.

Aster chuckled to himself, and carefully pulled a handful of snowdrops free of the wall. Like as not he didn't need to worry. Wasn't the first time the tunnels had changed on him, wouldn't be the last. And the snowdrops would look good at the base of that big oak by Jack's lake, the one the kids had put a couple planks on and called a tree fort.

He gave a little hop to get up out of the tunnel, and moved over to the oak. The snowdrops looked bright and cheerful and only a little out of place with their flowers; the tunnel might have been spring, but the world above was moving into summer.

"Aw, Bunny." Jack cooed. Aster shrieked and jumped up into the tree branches, and found himself clinging to one sturdy limb with every muscle tight and his claws hurting from how they were digging into the wood. "Whoops, thought you noticed me."

It took several tries to force words past his racing heartbeat. "No," he wheezed. "I didn't."

Jack grinned, bright and easy, looking... Well, it was a familiar stance for him, their interactions before the winter spirit joined the Guardians had always been something like this. Either Jack was the one up high or Aster was, but Jack was always lounging against his staff, at least to start. His hair
was tousled, his eyes bright and his smile easy, and he'd had that blue sweater for longer than Aster cared to remember.

He looked good. Not at all like he was part of the forest, he didn't blend in, but he didn't seem alien to it either.

"You've got your 'paints and parchment' expression on again," Jack said, and milked his subsequent sigh for all it was worth.

"Oh, like you mind. Maybe later." Summer was good, Jack stood out - white and blue in a world of green and gold - but autumn, autumn would be amazing. Green would turn to red and yellow and a gentle brown, and it'd be something to have Jack with that as a background.

He'd probably run out of paint in autumn colours, though. Oh well.

Jack laughed, and launched himself up into the air, coming to rest on another tree branch. "What were you thinking about?" he asked. "Seriously, could've sworn you noticed my shadow…"

Aster rolled his eyes, and pulled his claws free. Now his fingers and toes ached. "Just… thinking. Focused on gardening."

Jack sprawled out on the branch, at his apparent ease. He couldn't have looked more comfortable if he'd been relaxing on their bed. "Where do you suppose North hid the stuff?"

"Behind an illusion, probably." Aster looked ruefully down at the ground, and then mentally shrugged. The tree was solid, the branch strong; he did move closer to the trunk, but that was as much for something to recline against as anything. "Sandy probably did it, he's better at them."

"Well, the kid's will be along in a while, I think. Families." Jack sounded halfway asleep at that. Aster almost wished they weren't on separate branches, so he could hug the poor idiot.

He cast about for a change of subject, and thought of something that, if it wasn't a change, would hopefully be an entertaining tangent. "What do you suppose you'd have studied, if you'd ever gone to college?"

From the silence, Jack was questioning his sanity, Aster's sanity, and the whole world's sanity. Or fighting back a giggle fit. "Really?" he asked, voice tight with some kind of emotion.

"Sure, why not? Seems the right kind of day to wonder, doesn't it?"

"I guess..." There, thoughtful. Good. Better than that slight tension from missing his family. "Is it cheating to say young child psychology? The teaching one, I mean."

Aster watched the leaves overhead, and hummed. Wasn't like Jack could see him. "Not really. A bit predictable though, isn't it?"

Jack didn't answer; the ambient sounds quickly took over, birdsong and leaves rustling in the scanty breeze. Off in the distance was a bit of automobile noise, but Aster was used to that creeping everywhere, and at least the engines were quieter than the first 'horseless carriages'.


"That one might be predictable, too," he said, amused.
Jack hummed in reply, and then snickered. "What about you? Landscaping?"

Landscaping? Planning out gardens, planting everything, taking care of the end result? Nice as that sounded… "Nah. Beneath this calm and bohemian exterior beats the heart of a rational engineer, mate."

Jack twisted and darted around to stand on Aster's branch. "Did you just use bohemian in a sentence?" he asked, nose wrinkled just a touch.

"Technically speaking, so did you."

"I will throw you off this branch, see if I don't."

"Ah, rack off, gumby."

Jack laughed, and sprawled forward until he was draped over Aster, head pillowed on the Pooka's chest. It couldn't have been comfortable, the way his spine bent backwards like that, but he didn't seem inclined to move. Aster wrapped an arm over Jack's shoulders, and considered a quick nap.

"Sandy would teach media studies," Jack mumbled. And then yelped when Aster dug his claws through his sweater in shock. "Hey! I bleed!"

"You deserve to!" Oh, his heart. "I thought you were asleep!"

"Wasn't! Aren't! Ow, what even. Am I bleeding?" Jack twisted, trying to check his back; Aster was forced to grab him by the hair to stop the constant squirming.

No blood, thankfully, though there were eight tiny holes in the fabric. "You're good," he said, and released Jack. "Crikey, Jack, warn a bloke."

Jack muttered something under his breath - and it seemed to be in Shawnee, so of course Aster understood none of it - and went back to using Aster as a pillow. "Well?" he asked, snuggling in. "Do you agree with me, hair-trigger?" He paused, and chuckled. "Heh. Hair-trigger."

"I'm not on a hair-trigger, you menace. Agree with what?"

"Sandy. Media studies. College. Yes?"

One day, he needed to figure out what, exactly, went through that frosty brain that didn't go through a sane person's. On the other hand, it was something to do while they waited to start the Guardians-and-believers party. "What's media studies involve, anyways?" he asked. He started combing through Jack's hair, the silky and soft strands sliding over his claws and the pads of his fingers in a pleasant way.

"Studying media," Jack said, and twitched away from Aster's poking fingers. He almost fell off the branch before he caught himself. "Hey, none of that. It's, uh, it's like… the study of stories with the addition of visual media. And tropes - you know," he added, at Aster's confused expression. "How many different versions of Beauty and the Beast are there?"

"The ones currently living?" Aster tilted his head. "Because just the one set. Or - you mean stories."

"Right. The douchebag prince gets cursed, the kind and generous maiden frees him by falling in love, yadda yadda… and then someone goes 'well I liked this part, true love breaking the curse' and uses it in something else. Was it Beauty the Beast that came around first, or Prince and the Frog?"
Jack peered up at Aster, eyes wide and innocent. And then he flailed and started squeaking. Aster had to steady him, but it was no use. Jack tumbled to the side, Aster went the other, and only a quick twist mid-air enabled him to land on his feet. It wasn't much of a fall, maybe twelve feet, but it was still one that could have been avoidable and he was going to make that point loudly clear to Jack.

And then the gumby slammed into Aster's side, clinging like an enraged koala and squeaking like a dog's toy. "Bunny! Bunny BunnyBunny - do you mean it?!"

Well, there were some bruised ribs right there. "Mean what?" he demanded, and shoved Jack back to arm's length. He didn't seem to mind or notice, eyes aglow with excitement.

"You said they were real!"

Aster paused, and reviewed what he'd said. Oh. "Yes…" He considered bolting for a rabbit hole, but that was probably cowardly. Or just good sense. "Happened after that Disney fellow made the movie."

Jack wrinkled his nose. "Okay, we need to explain movies better… but they're really real?"

"Switch around between Disney worlds. Lands. Those places."

"Oh man," Jack breathed, and pulled away to bounce a little on his toes. "Wow, really? You mean it?"

Oh, he was too old for this. "Yeah," Aster said, and sat down beside the new plantings. "They're real."

"Do you think they'd sign an autograph for me?"

Chapter End Notes

Have a bit of fluff before the UTTER AND COMPLETE DOOM coming up next. - smile- Oh yeah, warning tags...
Jack was fairly certain that the kids' graduation (and Sophie's, three years later, though she went on to university and so technically remained in school) marked a turning point in his life. It went from normal, with his work keeping winter running smooth and giving kids snow days and at least one good snowball fight - Texas weathermen cursed his name, and that was only America. Egypt probably wanted him dead. But after the graduation? Yeah, no.

Jamie's not-for-profit was a hit. He'd found this company that a) made winter coats that doubled as sleeping bags and b) hired homeless folk to make them, which was nice. The company was in Detroit, and Jamie arranged for coats to be shipped to Burgess. Jamie also told everyone who would listen - and a few who didn't want to, like politicians - that he planned on helping the company open a location in Burgess, so they could distribute directly from the workplace.

And Jack was proud, he was, it was just…

Jamie and his volunteers dressed in a white hat and a blue, hooded sweater. So now, if he was around Burgess, he was just as likely to be seen and talked to as walked through. Not just kids! Adults too! It was so weird, especially since the adults that saw him looked a little haunted behind that friendly smile.

Dropping in on Jamie at his office didn't explain anything, since Jamie was often busy fielding calls, writing letters, talking with Burgess' local homeless - a thankfully low number, though anything above zero was honestly too high - and in general busier than a one-armed paper hanger. Everyone in the office seemed to see Jack.

It was all very weird.

Still, there was always somewhere needing a bit of snow, and his winter work didn't exactly slow down just because he was getting more believers in leaps and bounds. (Whether they just believed enough to see him because they thought he was one of Jamie's volunteers, or if they believed in Jack Frost, was up for debate.) It was honestly something of a relief to go out and wrestle with hurricanes, or pound heads until two rival snow maiden clans settled down to negotiations.

Bunny, meanwhile, got… not weird, exactly, just… different. The clothes were nice, he picked good colours, and it all looked nice. A bit different, since Jack had met Bunny during his nudist period - Bunny made great expressions when Jack phrased it that way - but not bad.

No, the weirdness was how he kept hiding whatever he was doing in the Warren, except he wasn't hiding it, exactly, he just wasn't telling Jack. Maybe it was dancing. Bunny had gotten graceful, more so than usual, in the last little while.

Then there were the books. Jack enjoyed reading, couldn't understand the people who didn't, but… Bunny read engineering textbooks, collections of papers about soil properties and rock compositions...
and other things with titles that made Jack's eyes cross. And it wasn't that he didn't like reading books on science or anything - physics especially, it was just math, and Jack was pretty good at that. Besides, Science of Superheroes was a hoot - but still. There was scientific, and then there was egghead, and Bunny was reading egghead material.

It was all very nice, and domestic, and comfortable. Jack loved it. That craving for domesticity had created his domain and the house, everything in it. And he'd been alright living on his own, but having Bunny live with him? The absolute best.

Of course, there was something to be said for living like a half-feral wild thing, the way he had his first two, three decades as a spirit.

Harder for an enemy to get a jump on a guy, for one thing.

Jack slammed into the tree trunk with enough force to crack something, bounced off, and caught his staff up in one foot. He twisted, staff flipping to his hand, and fired a blast of frost at the nightmare. The demon-horse jinked to the side, one haunch glittering faintly with a dusting of ice crystals, and shrilled a challenge.

There wasn't any time to answer the challenge or make one of his own. There were other nightmares, and they were all after Jack.

He dodged hooves slamming down where his head had been, teeth snapping at his shoulders and arms. Nightmares were smarter than horses, but their attacks were limited to equine abilities… oh, and flying, too.

Still, anyone who'd ever watched a herd of horses trample a luckless coyote or wolf to death knew they weren't helpless. Especially in numbers.

And the nightmares had numbers, Jack thought. He launched himself up into the air, shooting between two diving nightmares and dodging a third. There were nine, maybe ten, they were moving too fast for him to get an accurate count.

Adrenaline, the wonder-drug of humankind, surged through his veins. Jack bared his teeth in what was only marginally a smile, and spun his staff through his fingers.

"Still wanna try your luck, punks?"

The nightmares didn't even hesitate, just surged into the air in a herd of hostility and vicious amusement.

Jack liked to think he was smarter than people gave him credit for. He could have stood his ground and fought, but that was just asking for injuries. So, he turned and ran.

Well, flew, diving down to weave between trees and branches and erk… right. Japan's famous suicide forest. The nightmares following were a little less careful. Branches snapped and sand-bodies hit tree trucks and other noises Jack didn't care to think about followed behind him.

He was opening a lead though. Jack put a little more wind at his heels, images flashing by too quickly for him to properly register. Tree, rock, tree, nightmare surging forward only to trip and tumble. Jack was going as safely as he dared, and the nightmares weren't able to match him.

There'd be a nightmare hunt in the near future. Only question was if Sandy wanted help or n-
Swirling. Pain. Teeth shoulder pain pain -

Staff from foot to hand. Spin so crook points towards source of pain. Ice coating. Stab .

A scream. Jack dropped, only to get blindsided by a bus . A tree broke his short flight, and he might've broken the tree. Definitely that shoulder. Couple of ribs. He shook the blood out of his eyes and squinted at the new attacker.

Big. Very big. Built a little like a bear, a lot like something from the bottom of the ocean. Four limbs, four wavy things that could've been fins, or tentacles, or something. Four horns, two stabbing upwards from the forehead, two curling around the non-existent ears like ram's horns. Four eyes, two red with yellow sclera, two yellow with white sclera. A mouth full of fangs, Jack's blood dripping off them. Patches of fur at the elbows, heels, base of the horns and down the underside of the throat to a muscular chest. Everywhere else the creature was covered by a mixture of leathery skin and scales. From head to toe, it was dark gray, in places shading to black.

"Shit," Jack said, sounding almost giddy. "You're a fearling."

The fearling narrowed all four of its eyes, and then roared. Shrieked. Some horrible combination of the two. Very loud, whatever it was.

Jack tossed a snowball. It went wide, but it at least stopped the noise . The second was better, but it was hard to miss when the target was two feet away and closing.

The fearling sneezed as snow went up its nose, and then sneezed again and jerked to the side. The approaching nightmares shied away as the fearling began to toss its head, long horns stabbing and slashing with no respect for anything nearby. Several trees were opened up and oozing sap. The fearling continued to sneeze, which at least meant Jack wasn't being stabbed to death or anything.

Speaking of death… ow. He was in no condition to fight now . That was… wow, he did not want to look at his arm. His shoulder was probably worse. Time to leave.

… Which way was up, again?

"Wind!" Jack screamed, just a hint of desperation in his voice. A tiny hint. "Take me - anywhere but here!"

The wind snarled and dove beneath the treetops, snapping branches through sheer velocity. Everything that hit the ground was covered in a thick layer of rime.

Jack had half a breath to brace himself, and then the wind had him, carrying him up into the open sky with no regard to things like frail human flesh or how hard frozen wood could be. The fearling was left behind, clawing the ground and sneezing in rage. The nightmares tried to follow, but the wind was faster.

"Workshop," Jack gasped, and switched his staff to his feet, gripping tight. He fumbled his belt free with one hand, and managed to wrap it tight around the top of his arm.

Pity he couldn't bind off above the bite, he thought, everything going a bit muzzy. But then, it was his fingers going black and numb. He could still feel the rest of him. Probably. It all hurt, anyways.

He didn't faint, he wasn't that lucky. The wind was as gentle as it could be, but it was somewhat telling that the wind's physical form was a herding dog, not a bird dog. Gentle had his eyes rolling back and his stomach lurching with pain-induced nausea.
Jack was dropped onto hard packed snow, and he rolled twice before falling still. The cold burned his injured arm and numbed the rest of his body.

Large hands, hard with muscle and callous, cupped his face. Jack squinted his eyes open, and saw a mess of pale fur and bright blue eyes.

Things blurred - he might have passed out, or the pain might have blanked things out - and when he blinked and opened his eyes again, he was on a sled. It would've been a dog sled, except it was being pulled by a polar bear.

Jack frowned. That didn’t seem right. A polar bear? Why would a polar bear tow a sled? They usually had more dignity than that.

It was snowing. Great, big, fluffy flakes that touched his cold cheeks and then melted into tiny pinpricks. He felt them, and watching them fall, he felt them. Every last flake, every fractal-extension, the way they were all unique and individual and yet ultimately the same.

Just like people, he thought, though he was losing grasp of how that was. Snowflakes were just like people.

Things didn't blur, this time, but folded together. Time stretched out into forever, and snapped back. He was at the workshop. Yeti transferred him from the sled to a stretcher, careful of his arm and shoulder. He tried to tell them it wasn't necessary, he couldn't feel it anymore, but his tongue wouldn't work.

They moved him to a bright room with white walls, and cut his clothes off him. The blue sweater was soaked in blood. His pants had finally taken one hit too many; Jack caught glimpse of brown scraps, too many holes for him to patch them up again.

"Jack, my boy," North said. He brushed Jack's hair back off his forehead, and then his eyes widened, horror and something else making him blanch.

"What?" Jack asked, and looked down.

Oh. Oh. Shit. Oh.

"Cut it off," he wheezed. A yeti yelled something out into the hall. He ignored the noise. "Cut it off!"

"Jack, you must be calm!"

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Calm? No! "North cut it off!"

"Get the sedatives here," North snapped. He pressed Jack down into the stretcher with one hand. It made the broken edges of Jack's ribs grind together, but that was better than that - that thing.

"Cut it off." He grabbed onto North's wrist and clung. "Cut it off, North, you gotta, cut it off. I don't care, just cut it off."

North snapped something in Russian. Something sharp pricked Jack's neck, and then there was - immediate. Fuzzy and immediate, and everything started to fall.

The last thing he saw was the claw. Black and sharp, flexing slowly, at the end of his wrist.

Chapter End Notes
Who hates me now?
"Bunny," North croaked. Aster looked up; North looked as bad as he sounded. Old, tired, and gray. The bags under his eyes were big enough to smuggle contraband in, and he shuffled bent over, like he needed a cane.

"How's Jack?" he asked, shifting over so North could drop down on the couch beside him.

As waiting rooms went, this one was somewhere in the middle. The seating was all comfortable chairs and couches, but everything was in shades of bland beige and gray. It smelt of wood polish and a few potted flowers, not disinfectant, but nothing was going to cover up the old - and fresh - scent of blood.

North groaned when he sat down, and shook his head. His hair, unbound, made a faint hissing sound as it dragged over the linen of his shirt. "When did you get in?"

"Here." There was a carafe of water and several glasses on the low table, not quite a coffee table, within reach. He poured North a glass and handed it over. The water was lukewarm, but North downed it readily enough, and then sipped at the second Aster poured for him.

"I arrived about the time Jack was screaming to cut it off. What…?"

"His arm." North closed his eyes, and simply sat there for a moment. "We saved it. Barely. Anyone else, cut it off, save the shoulder, but Jack's healing…" He shrugged. "Could have been worse. Arm is very hurt, right now, but will get better. Possible scarring, though, fearling infection nothing to sneeze at."

"Sneer," Aster corrected, everything suddenly distant and unfocused. "Nothing to sneer at. Fearling?"

North huffed, and shook his head. "Snee, sneeze, neither pleasant to look at. And da, fearling. Hard to mistake for anything else. Your old healing herbs would not go wrong, though unicorn… water… seemed to do trick."

"Ever gonna explain that unicorn water stuff?" Water purified by a unicorn's horn was just safe to drink; it didn't carry any special properties. North looked shifty, which probably meant Aster didn't actually want to know what the stuff was. He'd had enough of it forced down his throat and poured over countless wounds to know that it tasted a bit like weak vegetable broth, smelt like bad apple cider, and burned like fire on cuts and worse.

"You will sleep better if I don't." North heaved himself back up onto his feet. "Yeti should be done cleaning up. You can visit Jack. Is not pretty sight, but again, he will heal."

"Where are you off to?" Aster stood up as well. He'd be better off ducking down to the Warren, collecting those special herbs and bringing them back. Even if he wanted to plant himself beside
Jack's bed, it wasn't logical. At least not until he'd gotten everything else squared away.

North gave him a look like he was doubting the Pooka's intelligence. "Fearling got hold of Jack. So, special weapons, yes? Going to the vault."

Oh, right. Aster nodded. "I'll get those herbs." And then make himself a permanent fixture in the sick room until Jack woke up.

The Warren was like a young jungle when he ducked in, the fields covered in bushes and surrounded by trees covered in ivy and other climbing vines. Aster squinted at all the new growth - very new, hadn't been there over Easter prep - and then shook his head. He had Jack to worry about, those herbs to pick up… he could fret over whatever was happening to his Warren later.

The herbs, at least, were right where they were supposed to be, growing wild as they did best. Herbs was perhaps stretching it a bit, as a few of them were trees, old, old trees from before humans moved out of their caves and hide tents. Aster gathered several small bags of leaves, shavings from the inner bark, and carefully cut roots and twigs. Despite his haste, he dropped a bit of natural rubber over each small wound. There wasn't likely to be much that could hurt them in the Warren, but better to take care now than really need this stuff and not have it.

He was back at the Workshop as fast as he could run, and gave the bags to the first medical yeti he saw. The yeti took them with thanks, and then showed him into Jack's recovery room.

Aster had to stop, and force down his immediate reaction. Panic might have been a reasonable response, but it wouldn't help Jack any.

Jack's usual pale skin had gone a grayish-white, and looked faintly clammy under the harsh lights. Aster knew the lights were so the yeti had an easier time scouring everything clean and seeing details, but they weren't complimentary to anyone.

Intimidating tubes and lines fed down into Jack, some into his nose - oxygen, Aster supposed - and some into the back of his hand or further up his arm. Some vanished under the covers, and he probably didn't want to know exactly where they went or what they were for. There were bags of liquid, some looking like they were dripping fluids into Jack, others like the fluids were dripping out.

There were bandages, on Jack's forehead and cheek, and further down around his chest from what Aster could see. The visible bandages were spotted with red.

As horrible as all that was, there was always something worse. Like Jack's right arm.

Jack's skin darkened from the shoulder down, bruising or something else. His arm was mottled in shades of black and dark purple, with hints of blue around his three remaining fingernails. Metal spokes poked up through his skin, wired and welded together to keep everything immobile. Aster knew it was to keep the bones in place, and other things, but it just looked like some horrific torture device to him. Thick lines of white stitches crossed over Jack's bicep and forearm; in other places the cuts had been left open to weep a yellow-tinted fluid; no blood, strangely. Or not so strangely. Towels had been layered under his arm to soak up the liquid.

The room stank of rotting flesh.

Aster gagged, but moved over to the chair beside Jack's bed. On the side furthest from the - the arm. He had no idea how this was 'saving' the arm; no idea how anyone could heal from something like this, even as fast as Jack healed.

There weren't any time keepers in the room; the only windows opened onto other inside rooms for
ventilation, not outside, to keep everything sterile and controlled. There was, therefore, no way to know how long he sat beside Jack, wanting to touch him, stroke his hair and hold his hand, but not daring because of the many injuries.

Sandy opened the door, made a face at the smell, and closed the door before floating over to hover beside Aster. He rested one hand on Aster's shoulder, and then lightly jostled Aster until he turned to look at him.

Sandy, expression unusually grave, stared into his eyes, hands moving to the Pooka's temples. A silvery whisper, no louder than snowflakes brushing against each other, slid through Aster's mind.

*Have faith, my friend. Have hope.*

Aster looked away, not daring to dislodge Sandy's hands. Faith? That wasn't the problem. "Of course he's going to get better," he murmured, reluctant to disturb Jack, even in drugged sleep. "He's a tough bastard. But I dunno, Sandy, his arm…" He winced, and shook his head very slightly. "How can anyone heal up from that?"

Sandy, at least, didn't try to pet and placate him, but gave his concern actual thought. *Humans are survivors,* he whispered. *I have seen mortals with worse, and with time and work, heal nearly to the point they had been at before their injury.*

Whether Sandy meant for Aster to pick up the images or not, faint… memories, almost, slid across his mind's eye. People who'd been pulled out of car accidents, limbs twisted and torsos crushed; people who'd survived horrific attacks, acid and fire, knives and hammers. Girls who'd been shot and boys who'd been drowned and a whole litany of the violence humans could do to each other.

And the resiliency of life, too. Hospitals, some with the latest in technology, others only a few steps better than what'd been on offer in the middle ages. After the surgery, people waking up to find their lives had changed forever. The despair, the disgust, the regret… but too, the determination, the endurance, the *hope* that tomorrow would be easier than today.

The end result; crutches, a wheelchair; a stutter, a weak arm or leg. Not being able to breathe properly anymore, scars that made people point and stare. And still going, regardless.

Ordinary humans, mortal and with only their own strength to pit against insult and injury. They survived, and recovered. Why wouldn't Jack?

"Fearling infections are a bit different than a bullet to the brain, mate," Aster said, a little shaken. He'd started ignoring human politics and wars for a reason… and children getting shot because they just wanted to go to school was part of it.

Sandy shook his head, and pulled away. The symbolic language he used wasn't always clear, but it was usually entertaining. At the moment, Aster just felt weary. No matter how hard it was for Sandy to communicate the other way, star-pilot telepathy and Pookan mind-meld barely able to match up, at least that way didn't involve guessing games.

Shark-toothed tadpoles swam around in formation, only for similarly-sized Jack Frosts to show up and start beating up the tadpoles. Aster watched in some bemusement and a great deal of exhaustion, before finally shaking his head and giving up.

"You've got some 'roos loose up there," he said, and looked back at Jack. "He sleeping enough to dream, you think?"

Sandy sent a drift of sand fluttering over Jack's face, but the grains didn't sink in, or wrap up into a
dream. The dreamweaver shrugged, and then shook his head. Well, possibly that was for the best. Any dreams Jack had, right now, would probably be unsettled by the fearling venom.

Aster reached over and cuddled Sandy to his chest. Sandy went willingly, curling up on Aster's lap with a pleased little smile. He patted Aster's chest, and then shrugged, unable to comb out fur that was covered in cloth. Aster hummed in reply, not at all disappointed; it was weird having someone else groom him, now.

Sandy took his leave, after a bit, and Aster almost wished he was going along with. The sick room was a depressing place, with only himself and Jack's quiet breathing for company. The arm didn't look any better; Jack didn't look any better.

He fell into a bit of a fugue state, coming out when a yeti entered the room, a covered basket in one hand. He watched as the yeti moved to Jack's side, and pulled a large jar of leeches out. The yeti glanced at him, and then went to work, starting by pulling the sheets down and revealing Jack in all his mottled-bruising glory.

The yeti grumbled at Aster, and after a quick mental translation, he nodded and helped unwrap the bandages. Here, at least, were signs of Jack's healing, places where cuts were sealed over, white lines bisecting heavy bruises. Jack's chest was purple and blue and touches of green; his stomach and hips covered in scabbed-over scrapes.

The yeti began setting leeches out over the worst of the bruises. Aster winced; leeches had their place, and they did work wonders sucking blood out of bruises, but... "Doesn't he need his blood?" he asked.

He got a snort and a grumble about 'air-head academics'.

"Oy! Look at him, he's all bruise! That's a lot of blood them buggers will suck out!"

The yeti jabbed a finger at him, and growled that the bruise-blood was all dead and wasn't any use to Jack anymore. Then the yeti went back to work, finishing with Jack's chest and layering the remaining leeches over Jack's arm.

"What about the fearling venom?"

Aster recoiled from the baleful expression, and the yeti's threat to put a leech somewhere unpleasant. He sat, carefully quiet, while the yeti finished emptying the jar. The leeches on Jack's chest were starting to swell up from their meal of blood, and the one that tried moving to a different spot - one closer to an intimidating tube in Jack's side - was nudged back into place. The yeti seemed to have no interest in conversation, and there was nothing to do but watch the leeches feed.

First one leech, and then a cascade of them, finished up and began squirming around. The yeti scooped them up, as tender as if the leeches were newborn babies, and dropped them back into the jar. The ones on Jack's arm were still going, but his chest, once free of leeches and wiped down, looked better. The bruising had turned yellow and pink, his skin a little less stretched and clammy.

The leeches on Jack's arm were still at it, but not for long. There wasn't any noticeable difference, this time, but the yeti looked satisfied once his leeches were back in their jar and he'd poked at Jack's arm for a few minutes.

The yeti clapped Aster on the shoulder as he went for the door, the blow almost knocking Aster out of the chair. Then he was alone again, just himself and an unconscious winter spirit for company.
No, I wasn't going to chop Jack's arm off (this time), however tempting it might have been to consider it. -grin- Although an ice version of the Winter Soldier's arm, plates shifting with each gesture, is a fun mental image to play with. (Hey, magic can make for super-awesome prosthesis, and if Jack can do an arm then he can probably do a leg... Oops, no, don't need extra story ideas right now.)

That said, fair warning - work is being... I work in a call center, it's roadside assistance, so as you might imagine it's not always clear when it's going to be busy or not. Winter's obviously busy, but as an evening shift person, I generally have downtime where there's really and honestly nothing to do but write fanfic or stare at the wall. However, past... month or so? Well, it's been busy. Very, call-after-call-until-end-of-shift busy. I'm staying ahead of my posting schedule, barely, but I may have to consider dropping down to posting once a week if this keeps up, or a hiatus entirely. However, it has shifted to spring, which I hope means things will once more calm down and I can return to filling the dead time with writing.

Y'know, should I ever get dead time again.
In all, it took two and a half weeks before Jack woke up. On the third day North told Aster that Jack’s coma was due to a cocktail of strong drugs and not some invisible head injury; it took another four days before Aster stopped growling at North for his duplicity in not telling him about the drugs immediately. Sandy and Tooth, relegated to go-betweens, were amused and irritated in about equal measure.

Aster spent his time watching over Jack - not brooding, like North kept calling it, watching - or running for medicinal plants and herbs at the yetis’ request. He suspected they occasionally sent him out just so he wouldn't be underfoot while they worked on Jack, but as he had no desire to actually watch any surgeries, he was fine with that.

Jack healed quickly enough, at least, even on an intravenous line of water and electrolytes. Most of his injuries were cleared up in the first week; it was only his shoulder and arm that took longer. Everywhere else was bruise-free, skin once more a healthy shade of ivory, perhaps a little paler than normal... but when someone was as fair of skin as Jack, it was rather hard to tell.

The bruising on his arm eventually faded, but retained a faintly bluish tinge, as though covered with a faint layer of ice. The scars - and there were scars, as stitches were removed and the metal framework was taken away - were a flat white; thick, raised lines and dots that were similar to some tattooing processes Aster knew about, but very different.

North allowed the drugs to be eased off only after the final stitch was removed and healed over. Jack didn't wake immediately, and Tooth used that as an excuse to turn traitor and drag Aster out of the room and into a bed, with orders to clean himself up after he'd slept.

He would have argued, but he was so tired he couldn’t climb out of the bed. It wasn't that he hadn't slept for two weeks, but the chair wasn’t very comfortable, and his naps hadn't been restful.

When he woke up, he stumbled into the washroom and grabbed the first brush that he saw. There was no point in a full grooming, not when he'd slept for who knew how long, but the worst of the bedhead was cleared up.

And then he walked out into the hallway and a yeti told him Jack was awake, and had been for several hours.

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" he demanded, and hurried to Jack's room.

Hand on the doorknob, he paused and listened. No one was yelling, but someone - Jack, his voice, and Aster felt something wobble deep in his gut - was speaking forcibly.

Aster swallowed, and swung the door open.

"-and now you're telling me you soaked my arm in unicorn piss!" Jack snarled, glaring fit to light North's hair on fire.

Aster paused. Thought about what he'd heard. Blanched.

"That's what unicorn water is?" Oh, he didn't feel good anymore…
Jack grinned at him, suddenly delighted. "Bunny!"

North stared at him, suddenly horrified. "Bunny."

"You made me drink that shite!" Oh, bloody - not shite, but close enough… "How many times, North? How many?" His stomach lurched, and he looked frantically for a garbage pail. And then decided if it came to it, North's boots would get a nice coat.

"It's very pure," North protested, backing away. Aster advanced, if only because there was only so far projectile vomit could go. "Very sterile, very good for, uh, cleansing and purifying, and…" North gulped, and then charged.

Aster let himself get shoved to one side, and focused on not losing his stomach's contents all over the floor. He looked up, and scowled at Jack's delighted grin. "Don't even start," he growled. "He might've soaked your arm, but I drank it."

Jack's grin immediately screwed up into a look of disgust. "Ew. Did you know?"

"No." Aster shook it off; the last time had been two centuries ago, and by this time his stomach lining would have replaced itself hundreds of thousands of times. Besides, North was right; urine, as a sterile liquid, was good for cleaning wounds in a pinch. Still, drinking it…

Jack's expression softened, and he gestured towards the chair with his left hand. "Well, hey, Cottontail. Nice to see a friendly face."

"Good to see you, too," Aster said, and sat down. He still felt a bit wobbly, but his stomach was settling. "How do you feel?"

Jack's bright smile did nothing to take away from his wary glance down at his right arm. "Pretty good, considering," he said. "Hungry, though."

"It's been about two and a half weeks," Aster told him. "Intravenous fluids aren't that filling."

"No kidding."

Aster squeezed Jack's good shoulder, and stood up. "I'll go find you a feast -"

Jack grabbed his hand with his left and clutched, his eyes suddenly wide and worried. "No, uh, no, I think there was a yeti going…?"

… Right. Aster clasped Jack's hand between both of his, and leaned down to better stare into Jack's eyes. "Just going to the door, Frostbite. Then I'll be right back. But North ran out at quite the clip, so better to make sure no one's been distracted."

Jack looked away, and cleared his throat. "Right," he said, and didn't protest when Aster stood up. The Pooka hurried to the door, somewhat uneasy at Jack's expression in his peripheral vision. There was a yeti just turning the hallway corner and approaching with an old fashioned rolling tray, covered platters and tureens of something that steamed.

He turned and returned to his chair. "Food approaches," he said, and took Jack's hand. "Hey, uh," he said, a thought occurring to him. "Where's your staff?"

Sure, Jack didn't carry it around at home, but that was in his own domain. Outside it, he usually had it in hand, occasionally putting it down but always staying close.
"Oh," Jack said, and nodded towards the far corner. "Over there." He didn't, Aster noticed, so much as twitch his right hand.

Nerve damage?

Before he could figure out a tactful way to ask, the yeti arrived with the food. It only took a few minutes for the yeti to set up a lap tray, serve Jack a bowl of chicken soup, broth thickened with cream and the bowl fair bursting with vegetables and dumplings, and otherwise arrange the covered platters to their preference. They left Aster to serve himself, but that wasn't a hardship; the rolling tray was within arm's reach, and there was plenty of food.

Jack did use his right hand while he ate, though he did so as little as possible and always with a faintly wary expression. He didn't show any difficulty using his left; Aster hadn't realized Jack was ambidextrous, but it made sense, he supposed.

The food was eventually demolished, and the yeti tidied away the dishes and then vanished out the door. It left the two of them in the quiet.

Jack was staring at his right hand, that wary expression on his face.

"Jack?" Aster waited until his friend looked up. "Is something wrong with your hand? Does it hurt, or -"


Aster nodded, and decided to take Jack's words at face value, for the moment.

If Jack continued to stare at his hand like it might reach up and strangle him, though... Well, he'd deal with that later.

His hand was cold.

Jack couldn't focus on the war meeting; instead, his attention was caught up by the way his hand kept tingling, feeling ever-so-slightly... cold. It looked cold, too; he'd always been pale, even before becoming a spirit, his mixed heritage showing more in bone structure than skin colour. But this was ridiculous. His hand had gone the pale, off-white from the first stages of frostbite. Something he couldn't get.

And it felt cold.

He pressed his hands against the table surface. The table felt cool and slick under his left hand, and very faintly he felt raised lines and small pock marks under his fingertips. Under his right, the wood felt warm, and he couldn't feel the wood grain at all, just the slick varnish.

Bunny reached over and covered Jack's hand with his own, the rough skin on his palm burning. Jack jumped, and looked up from his hands. Bunny was staring at North, one ear angled towards Jack. He swallowed, and tried to focus on North, too.

He couldn't. The Russian's words were so much muffled trumpet noises, like adults talking in Charlie Brown. Bunny's hand burned against his, and his arm was tingling, the scarring on his shoulder tight and hot, and the skin around it feeling so, so cold.

North said he was cured. The yeti said he'd been cured.
If he'd been cured, why was he still… feeling this?

He looked up, and stared at Bunny. What if they were wrong? He didn't get cold and he was feeling cold so maybe he was still infected. Still turning into a fearling. Into a monster.

It was too hot. His arm was freezing and the rest of him was burning, and he couldn't catch his breath. Couldn't breathe. It was happening, he could feel it, he had to -

Jack lurched to his feet, and stumbled. He clawed at his shirt collar, and then at the arm, burning from the cold.

"Jack!"

"Don't!" He flinched away from the hands, burning hot, and whimpered. No, no, no, no. "Don't, don't, I can't - it's not, it's not it's not, it's -"

"You're hyperventilating. I need you to breathe." Tooth shoved forwards, until he couldn't see anything but her face, her eyes. "Jack, breathe with me. Come on now, in… and out. You can do it. Just breathe, Jack. Jack?"

It was like falling through the ice again.

"Jack?"

It was cold, and dark, and he was scared.

"Jack!"

Chapter End Notes

Alright. Unfortunately, the story is now on a semi-haius - I will continue to post on Sundays, but will discontinue Wednesdays' postings. Unfortunately, I'm just barely keeping up. Hopefully discontinuing Wednesday posts will enable me to get back ahead of what you guys are reading, more than a few paragraphs' worth of words, anyways.

In other news, wish me luck - my original short story is soon to be off to the submissions pile, and my fingers are crossed that it'll take. In the mean time, I've got other original stuff to work on, so...
Chapter Notes

Native American spirits are depicted in this chapter, and while I have tried to be respectful, I didn't get to do as much research as I'd have been happy with, so if I get something wrong, please! Tell me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Panic attack," Aster diagnosed. He kept Jack cuddled close, head pillowed on soft, white fur. When Jack woke up, he wouldn't be alone. Given a minute or two, Aster's heart beat would even have slowed down from its panicked racing.

"Probably." Tooth rubbed her face with her hands, and glanced at Sandy. "Can you keep him asleep for a little bit? Some good dreams might help. At least short term," she added. There'd be some regular nightmares from this, maybe even night terrors, but at least it'd be part of the recovery process. About as much fun as lancing an infected wound so the pus drained out, but equally necessary.

Aster was already resigned to a few sleepless nights in the near future.

Sandy dusted a bit of sand over Jack's face, and his strained expression immediately relaxed, lines of tension falling away.

"It was a bit much to ask him to be alright immediately after leaving hospital bed," North observed, twisting to peer over Aster's shoulder. "Perhaps… Preliminary work should be boring, until fearlings are actually discovered. Could be hours… could be months. And Jack needs to rest and recover."

"You realize I'll have to practically sit… hm." Well, actually, that could work. Jamie and his little group always needed help, and most of Burgess could see Jack now, just because of that odd, quasi-uniform the Jack Frost Charity used. Envelope stuffing would keep Jack busy during most of the day, it wasn't like he'd ever say no to helping Jamie out.

"That could work," he decided, barely noticing he'd not said any of his reasoning out loud. Tooth gave him an odd look, but the other two just smiled and nodded.

Aster stood up, and adjusted Jack and his staff until he had both cradled comfortably in his arms. "I think, this once, I'll have to use a portal," he said, turning to North. The way Jack's staff knocked into his friend's knees was completely coincidental, no matter how much he disliked the portals.

North's expression said he was drawing incorrect conclusions between the request and the action, but he pulled a snow globe out of his pocket all the same. "Can't easily run through tunnels with unconscious frost spirit in your arms, hm?" he asked.

Aster opened his mouth to correct North, his tunnels were much larger now, and then thought better of it. He could probably use that to surprise the overgrown goofball. Why spoil the surprise?

North threw the snow globe, and Aster nodded to him. "Send a message if you find something," he said. "I owe that fearling something."
"We all do," Tooth reminded him. "Go on, then."

Sandy floated up and dusted a few more grains of sand over Jack's face, and then nodded. "Thanks, mate," Aster said, and stepped through the portal.

There was the customary lurch, as if the floor had dropped two inches halfway through his step, and then he was through. Home had never looked quite this good; the lawn, ever so slightly patchy, and the peeled logs that had gone a gray-brown with weathering. The fire and the oven would both be cold, and he dreaded the state of the cupboards, but walking up to the door and then closing it behind him felt wonderful.

It felt safe.

The sitting room was dark, and a little stuffy, but so very welcoming. The bedroom was a little better, especially once he cracked the windows open - one of Jack's endless improvements - but there was still going to be a bit of work to get the lamps cleaned out and refilled… Jack was hardly going to let him do it, he could get a bit odd about who cleaned the lamps.

He left the staff leaning up in one bedroom corner, and tucked Jack away in the bed. On his way out he paused and stared at the needlework of three Native spirits. It'd been a while since he paid it any mind, or the carvings on the wardrobe, but with Jack like this… Weren't spirit guides supposed to, well, guide? Mind, he knew more about the Dreaming, but…

Aster shook his head, and headed out to the living room. He'd get the fire started, open a few windows, and then see about something to eat.

Returning to the house was a good idea; when Jack woke up, he was calmer. Still unwilling to use his right arm, but he didn't seem as bothered by it.

At least up until his first bath.

Jack tore long, bloody furrows into the meat of his bicep, and spent hours shaking in Aster's grip after. He didn't answer any of Aster's questions, as if afraid giving voice to his fears would ensure they came true.

For a few days, Jack would seem fully recovered, but then something - a nightmare, using his right hand to pick something up, catching sight of his scars in the mirror - and he'd be plunged back into his utter terror. Aster did what he could, but he had no idea what to do to help. All he knew to do was cuddle Jack close and give him something to hold onto.

He couldn't even take Jack out to help Jamie with his charity; Jack was in no condition to deal with the public, the occasionally frightening adults who didn't believe, but still saw him. Some of Jack's panic attacks came with ice and only Aster's clothes and fur kept him from getting dangerously cold. It just wasn't safe.

After each panic attack, when Jack had calmed enough, Aster bundled him back into the bed with a mug of something warm and a book. He'd leave Jack to putter about in the sitting room or the kitchen, something reassuring and routine that Jack could hear, but first he'd look at that needlepoint and think.

Time blurred a bit, so he didn't know if it'd been one month, or six weeks, after he took Jack home. The panic attacks were getting worse, at least from what Aster could see on the outside. Jack had clawed at his arm several times, and he had little, niggling worries about what Jack might do in a panic if left alone. He almost hid the kitchen knives, but…
Instead, he pressed his hand against the needlepoint and felt for magic.

At first he thought there either wasn't any magic to the needlepoint, or his weakened magical core meant he couldn't pick it up, but - well. It shouldn't have surprised him, really; the Aboriginal magic of Australia was just as subtle, though this was like a thread of silk twined about with wool fibers. He plucked that thread with insubstantial fingers, and then left it.

He had to hope that he'd managed to call for help, and failing that, hope that he could help Jack.

Aster would have given his tail for a psychology book, particularly a useful one, but that wasn't the sort of thing Jack enjoyed reading, and he wasn't about to go leaving Jack alone… It wasn't as if he knew what he needed to look at, it'd take much too long to find a book even if he got help.

It was very late, day after he'd tried to use the needlepoint; so late it might as well have been very early morning. Aster had just gotten Jack back to sleep after a nightmare, and from what little he'd managed to get out of him, Jack was dead certain he was still infected from the fearling.

Just because Aster understood the fear, didn't make him any less exhausted. He didn't want to bring Jack back to the Workshop, not when North was part of the hunting party looking for the fearling. Besides, for all Aster knew, it might be getting close enough to Christmas that there'd be no rest for anyone. He wasn't sure, though, he couldn't seem to focus and keep in mind how much longer it was to Christmas, or Easter. About all he was sure of was it was still summer up in the Northern Hemisphere. He had no idea how Jack could handle his winter duties, like this, so at least things were calmer with winter in the south.

There was a quiet knock on the door.

Aster sat up, ears twitching. Jack shifted, and he automatically rubbed a hand over his shoulder to sooth him.

Another knock got him out of the bed and moving to the front door in moments. He gathered his nightgown around him, and then opened the door.

Three people, two men and one woman, stood on the doorstep. There weren't any lights stronger than the stars overhead, but Aster was able to make out every detail, even some colours.

The three of them were Native Americans, that much was obvious, though he wasn't about to start guessing what the one bloke's high cheekbones, or the other fellow's square jaw and flatter nose meant. Some indication of which tribe they belonged to? Their clothes probably meant more than any facial feature would, though what did it mean that high cheekbones wore a woven blanket draped around his shoulders over a leather tunic, while square jaw wore beaded leggings and fringed loincloth and nothing else?

The woman was simply striking, taller than the two men, leanly muscled, her features almost too beautiful to be real. Unlike the two men, her black hair was unbound, and fell to her hips. She wore some kind of beaded dress - and he knew that meant something, but he didn't have the first idea what - and pouches hung from a woven and beaded belt.

"Easter Bunny," high cheekbones said, eyes crinkling in what was probably amusement. "You called us for help?"

He'd called…?

Oh.
"I was expecting someone a bit more furry. Or feathered," he added. He stepped back, and waved inside the house. "Guess you want to come in?"

Square jaw chuckled, and offered the woman his arm, more like a European gentleman escorting his lady. It was just incongruous enough, with their traditional dress, that he blinked.

He stirred up the fire, and lit several lamps. The three Native spirits looked around with varying degrees of amusement and curiosity, before taking seats on the floor. Aster's eyebrows climbed halfway up to his ears, but he settled down into a crouch easily enough.

"Introductions, I think," the woman - their leader? - said, a friendly smile crinkling the corners of her eyes and turning her from merely beautiful to… well. More. Aster quite lost the thread of things, and she had to reach over and tap his chin before he closed his mouth.

"Come now, cousin," she said, her tone teasing. "Surely you have met others more striking than I?"

"Reckon not," he managed, and cleared his throat. "Introductions?"

"Quite," high cheekbones said, looking like he was only just managing to hold back laughter. "I am Raven," he said, and bowed his head. Aster wondered if the feathers braided - presumably - into his hair had been there all along and he just hadn't noticed, or if they'd appeared after he'd given his name. The tattoos definitely hadn't been there, stylized feathers peeking out from under his sleeves.

"Rabbit," said square jaw, nodding quickly. He didn't get any extras added to his appearance, and on him it would've been more noticeable.

"Coyote," the woman said, grinning again.

Aster squinted at her, a little less bewildered by her beauty. "Thought the stories call you a bloke?"

She waved one hand. "That is Coyote - the Coyote. I am a little Coyote, compared to him. Call him my father, it makes him twitch."

Rabbit leaned forward, nose wrinkling in what seemed to be amusement. "He's not. Coyote has avoided blood-children for many, many years, he doesn't want to be seen as old. But Coyote had the teaching of him, and they have many things the same. So, the daughter to make him old."

… Right. That sounded like the sort of thing Jack would not only understand, but find hilarious. Aster was just too tired to be anything but confused.

"So," Raven said, tilting his head. "You called us, Easter Bunny, with a gift meant for one who might need our help. Problem?"

He sighed, and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. "You could say that," he mumbled.

"Tell us, cousin," Rabbit urged. When Aster looked, the spirit was leaning forward, hands on his knees. "We cannot help if you do not explain. It has to do with our winter's son?" He nodded towards the bedroom door, left open a crack.

"Yeah," Aster said, and shook his head. "What do you know about fearlings?"

Not much; from what they implied, the Native spirits of their level - the smaller spirits, the guides instead of the powers - had little to do with fighting evils, and more to do with… well, it sounded like an odd cross between advising the humans when they asked, and watching over their animal, mortal
'cousins'.

"Not as much as the humans," Coyote said, and shrugged. "Animals need our help more urgently, but less often."

"Clear as mud," he said, and quickly explained what fearlings were, and what they did. "Jack fought one," he said, and gestured to his right shoulder. "Got one hell of a bite."

"And that caused an infection?" Raven asked, twisting to peer at the door. "Can we heal that?" he asked, presumably the other two.

"We - well, North and his yeti - managed to deal with the infection," Aster told him. "But…"

"Cousin?"

Suddenly, he wanted to laugh. Cousin? He had no cousins. They were all dead. This spirit, whatever he might be called, was no cousin of his.

A warm hand, with long, slender fingers, pressed against the nape of his neck. "Cousin," Coyote said, her amber eyes no longer bright and laughing. "Whatever is wrong?"

He sucked in a breath, and held it for three long seconds. "Nothing anyone can do much for," he admitted. "Jack… It's Jack. He's not… handling things well."

Three sets of eyes stared at him, two sets black and one amber. Aster cleared his throat, and looked at the bedroom door again.

"He's having panic attacks," he said, forcing the words out. "Constant nightmares. Everyone's told him the infection is gone, but he doesn't believe it. Says he can't feel things right through his arm, that it's frostbitten, but…" He shrugged. "Nerve damage, I reckon. He's had worse," he added, stomach twisting at the memory, "but it's just taking longer to heal."

Coyote nodded, and looked over at Rabbit. "And what have you called us for?" she asked.

"I don't know what to do." Aster squeezed his eyes shut, ears plastered to the back of his neck. "I am I helping him? Hurting? I don't… he's not getting better. And I'm worried he might… do something. Permanent. To his arm."

Rabbit cleared his throat, the sound at once diffident and yet confident. Aster opened his eyes and squinted at the spirit, more than a bit confused at how he'd managed that. "Brother, sister," he said, nodded to the other two spirits, "I will be back. Let me check our winter's son, yes?"

"Wise, brother," Raven said. "Your eyes will see more clearly than mine, with this."

"Not my eyes," Rabbit said. "My nose." He winked at Aster. "I'm sure you understand, eh?"

Aster blinked, and shook his head. "You're human," he protested, though not very loudly.

"Am I?" Rabbit grinned, his teeth the closest humans could get to proper buck teeth, and headed into the bedroom. Aster stared after him, more than a little confused. When he looked at Raven and Coyote, they both had innocent expressions he recognized at once. Jack had the same expression.

"Oh, don't you two start," he grumbled.

Raven chuckled, and Coyote snickered, both of them obviously keeping quiet in deference to the late hour. Quiet didn't seem to suit them, Aster thought, a touch sourly.
Yet they seemed content enough to just sit and wait for Rabbit to get back. Aster couldn't hear what was going on in there, no matter how he swivelled his ears, but at least he didn't have to wait too long. Rabbit came back to the sitting room, ghosting along on bare feet.

"Well," he said, and settled down into a crouch similar to Aster's. "There is no infection that I can pick up, but he seems frightened." He eyed Aster, his faint smile sympathetic and knowing.

"I think he'd seen his arm start to transform into a fearling limb," he said, and shivered at the memory.

"And what was done to cure him?" Rabbit asked. "Traditional medicine? Field? The modern, with the lifeless machines?" He waved one hand in dismissal of said machines. Aster couldn't help a faint smile. He'd known quite a few Pookan healers who would've agreed with Rabbit.

"Normally, someone gets hurt like Jack did? The arm would go and the work would be done to the shoulder. It's fairly brutal." North, Tooth, Catherine, Nightlight… Aster had managed to avoid getting fearling-bitten, but the others all had scars they refused to show. At least none of them had lost limbs, though the scarring on their torsos was rather terrifying to think about.

"Jack heals as fast as the wind blows," Coyote said, chin lifted. "And yet, the mind is different from the body. Stronger, and more fragile."

"First you soak the body part in… North calls it Unicorn water. It's, uh, urine."

The three Natives immediately went into paroxysms of silent laughter. It looked painful. Aster realized he was grinding his molars, and consciously relaxed his jaw. Unlike rabbits - he glared at one particularly named spirit - Pooka teeth grinding had more in common with frustrated humans.

"Are you done?" he demanded.

Raven snickered, and nodded. "Yes," he said. He wiped away a bit of moisture around his eyes. "So. First you soak the limb in…" He twitched, but managed to keep his hilarity under control. "- a special solution… And then?"

"You cut away dead flesh, or flesh that's still infected. I think North had to gouge out a bit of Jack's bones… Up near the shoulder?" He gestured at the specific area, and shrugged. "Soak the open wounds in more, erm… And then go back to cutting out anything dead or infected. There's herbs and such that I grow that helps with the healing, good for killing the infection, but it mostly involves knives and, well, you know."

Rabbit nodded and shrugged, looking a bit like a robin bobbing for worms. Maybe he'd been misnamed. "Easier to lose the limb, with that."

"If the infection came off an arm or leg, yeah," Aster agreed. He angled an ear back towards the bedroom; had he heard Jack stirring?

"And the physical is so taken care of, but what about the mind?" Coyote asked, her graceful eyebrows raised in curiosity.

Aster tilted his head. "Other than North's assurances it's been dealt with?" he asked. "Usually, tell someone the infection is dealt with and they won't become a fearling, it's enough. Might have a few bad spots remembering and all, but no one goes around thinking they're still infected."

Raven peered at the door, and then nodded. "We can help," he said, and grinned. For someone who was supposed to be a bird, his teeth were very straight and white.
"But you will have to stay here," Coyote warned. "Regrettable though it is, this is sacred. And you are… Hm…"

"Not one of you?" Aster suggested. It hurt, he wasn't going to deny it, but the thought that they were going to help… he was just relieved.

Coyote nodded, her hair flowing around and sliding over her shoulders like silken threads. "The ceremonies are sacred," she explained. "We do not like sharing them; too often they are stolen, mutilated, and our children mocked or worse for protesting."

"I will wake our winter's son," Raven said, and stood up with a flex of his legs only. "Try not to feel poorly," he added. "Growing up, beings such as Santa and the Easter Bunny were Europe's fancies, if known at all. He knows you as people, not authorities. To that, let the authorities settle his mind, hey?"

It made sense. Aster nodded, and felt something deep in his chest relax when Raven smiled at him, and then went to the bedroom.

"If you don't mind my asking," he said, looking to the two spirits remaining.

Coyote laughed, the sound muted yet still musical. "You wish to know which of us came to Jack, so very long ago?" she asked, eyes gleaming with amusement.

Aster nodded.

Rabbit stretched one leg out to the side, and snorted. "I helped his grandfather. Raven helped his mother."

Which left Coyote. Which… "I don't get it," he admitted, squinting at the woman.

Who was grinning at him.

"Don't you?" she asked. "Coyotes are adaptable, and I don't mean only habitat. My cousins enjoy having a pack, but can manage on their own. Coyotes are highly vocal - you need to get Jack to sing for you some time, it's lovely. Coyotes are smart, and tricky, and for all their small size are quite dangerous. Does that sound like anyone you might know?"

"I suppose," Aster said. Jack did enjoy company, though he was equally content to settle in on his own to read or carve. He was as vicious in a fight as he was gentle out of it.

"Besides," Coyote added, as if in an aside. "If I hadn't stepped in, Rabbit or Raven would have had to… or maybe Cougar."

Raven stepped out at that moment, Jack trailing after him, sleepy eyed and confused.

"Hey," Aster said. Jack looked calmer than he had in weeks, though it could have simply been the exhaustion.

"We're kidnapping you," Rabbit said, and slapped one hand on his thigh as he barked a laugh.

Coyote used Aster's shoulder to lever herself up onto her feet. "Your friend told us of your troubles," she said, and crossed the short distance to Jack. She slung an arm over his shoulders, and shook her head in mock-sorrow. "You should have called us at once. Now, come."

Jack blinked, and balked. "Now?" he asked, and looked around. Aster pointed to his staff, and
Rabbit slapped his hand down.

"Won't need that," Rabbit pointed out. Raven started to cackle.

Jack looked, if anything, disturbed. "Wait, what?"

"Won't need the clothes, either," Rabbit added, and snickered. "Don't worry! You're going to be fine! It'll barely hurt at all."

Raven stopped laughing to wheeze something in what Aster suspected was Shawnee, considering the way Jack twitched and flushed a dark red. "Raven!" he wailed.

Coyote tugged Jack towards the door, and grinned at Aster. "Don't wait up. We'll need at least half a moon - two weeks - or even the full thing. You might," she added, looking down at Jack, "come back with a tan. Wouldn't that be interesting?"

"Bunny?" Jack called, twisting in Coyote's grip to stare backwards with wide, mildly panicked eyes. "Bunny?"

Aster swallowed, and forced a smile. "See you later, Frostbite. Feel better."

Please, please, let Jack come back feeling better.

Hope was a bright and fluttering light in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

And the cavalry has arrived, at least when it comes to Jack's PTSD. One thing I think a lot of recovery fics disregard (at least, that I've seen), the religion you grow up is a powerful factor in your psychology. And while I'm sure everyone these days are raised to have that faith in doctors - if they say you're cured, then you're cured - Jack didn't. And North's just some guy who swings swords around, no medical training. So he's going to have a heck of a lot more faith in Rabbit, Raven, and Coyote than he is in the rest of the Guardians.

(Obviously, simply having a childhood authority say you're now okay isn't a solve-everything, but everyone's different, it certainly can't hurt, and let's be honest, Nicholas "I soaked your arm in Unicorn Pee" St North isn't very believable in this situation.)

Also, for my portrayal of the Native spirits... I'm going off Patricia Briggs and C.E. Murphy here. The spirits can appear as human, as animal, as a sort of Egyptian-style animal-head-human-body... whatever they want. Spirits. And there's Big Spirits - the fellows in stories who get up to mischief, fight evil, get the stories about them, so on and so forth - and then there's the little spirits, who guide and advise and are the support staff to heroes, not necessarily the heroes themselves.
It felt a little strange, returning home.

Jack was reminded, suddenly and without warning, of his first trip through Summerland to what would be his domain. He'd been wearing almost the same sort of clothing, though back then his linen shirt had been sewn by his mother, and this time it was a light cotton, woven by Spider and gifted by Coyote. The deer-hide trousers were a little better than the pair he'd had, new and clean and soft as that long-gone linen shirt.

His regular clothes were in a deer-hide bag slung over one shoulder, the hide a little rougher than his trousers, tanned a few shades darker. It was heavy with more than just his sweater; several new carvings warred for space with a dreamcatcher. He was pretty sure Coyote had wandered into the Ojibwe-claimed areas to beg-borrow-steal the parts, just as he was pretty sure Raven had donated the feathers and the gray-and-buff tufts of fur came from Rabbit and Coyote, respectively.

Coyote could've traded for the parts, he supposed, one hand on the fence post. But where was the fun in that?

Not for the first time, he was a little surprised he hadn't turned into a petty thief, with this Coyote as his guide.

"A little later than we told your Easter Bunny," Coyote observed, currently hip-height and four-legged. Her mouth dropped open in a canine grin, tail swaying lazily behind her. "I'm sure he won't mind."

Jack grinned, and flexed his right hand. Between old ceremonies and logic, he was much less freaked out about things than he had been. Now his worry was about whether he'd heal from the nerve damage, and how to make up for his formally stronger hand now being the weaker one.

"I'm sure he'll mind a lot," he said, the old language easy on his tongue. "Did you befuddle him very much?"

Coyote threw her head back and laughed, the high-pitched yipping only a little unnerving. And only because she tended to laugh like that right before dumping him in mud or a cold river, or tripped him so he went and got coated in tree sap and old leaves.

"Poor lad," she crooned, once her laughter had calmed. "He tripped over his tongue so many times."

Poor Bunny. Coyote in human form was a bit hard to deal with, no matter which way you swung. She was just too striking to be really real.

He rolled his shoulders back, and then forwards. "Well." He shifted his staff from hand to hand, and then settled down again. "Guess it's time for me to go back."

Coyote stared up at him. "Winter's son," she said, her voice warm as the summer sun and gentle as the caress of a spring breeze. "Loved though you are, this is not your home. And it is to your home you must go."

Jack looked away. Almost the exact words she'd sent him away with last time, just before he'd
created his domain. "Quoting yourself, now?" he asked.

"Who better?" She winked, and turned away. "Get going, before the dog-strangling vine climbs you."

He had to laugh at that, and nodded. "Thanks," he said, and lifted the gate latch.

In the space of a step, his surroundings wavered, blurring together into smears of green and brown and hints of other colours, only to clarify and settle. He'd crossed over from a forest very like something out of his childhood, with tall, graceful sumac trees, elms stretching for the sky and thick, sturdy oaks, with a dearth of undergrowth thanks to the lack of strong, direct sunlight reaching the earth and the regular burns the local tribes set up to keep the forest healthy. Now, he was surrounded by something more like the village he'd grown up with, only… alone. There was a stretch of grass, something like a cross between a lawn and a pasture, a few trees scattered about for shade. There was a log cabin, bigger than most of the houses in his memory, but not out of place. There was a gazebo, which was a little strange, but it was mostly hidden by the trees and shrubbery planted around it.

Something strong and deep moved through him. Relief, comfort, love… Home. He was home. Everything was bright, and about as warm as he could stand, with soft grass tickling the soles of his feet. It'd been nice, in Summerland; a little warm, but he could handle the heat. It just… it wasn't home. This was home.

He started for the front door, but something, some spark of mischief - Coyote was a bad influence - switched his easy approach to a stalk. In the space of a second he left the earth and floated through the air on the wind's gentlest zephyr, as quiet as it could go. He landed on the roof, barely making a sound.

Now where, oh where, was Bunny? He sent the wind off with a flick of his fingers, and crept along the rooftree, listening carefully.

His hearing was no better than most humans, but then again, this was his domain. He was pretty sure his hearing wasn't involved, it was just the sense his awareness filtered through.

The bedroom was empty, no surprise since it was the middle of the day. The sitting room was empty, windows open and all flames out. Kitchen, also empty, stove left cold and dead. But as he moved to the bathroom… Sauna, with the quiet hiss of water on hot rocks. A quick glance over the edge of the roof confirmed it; Bunny had done work in the vegetable garden. Expanding it, apparently, as there was certainly more plantings there than Jack remembered.

He sauntered back to the front of the cabin, and dropped down beside the door. The hinges were silent, and he ghosted through to the kitchen. After a sly glance at the bathroom door, he turned and got started on lunch. Something a bit more substantial than a mere salad, but… cool. It was hot enough, no need to toss a hot meal on top of it.

He ended up making a salad anyways, but fruit, not vegetables. Slices of apples and pears and grapes, because apparently Bunny had either gone foraging in a vineyard or did some trading while Jack was away. He almost hoped it was the first; these were actually pretty pathetic, and at least if Bunny took them from some mortal's vineyard he'd leave payment in giving the rest of the plants a jolt of energy. Jack had seen him do it, too. Subtle, of course, on a level of magic Jack couldn't begin to follow, but that seemed to be the way Bunny's magic usually worked.

Bread and butter went on the table, with a crock of yogurt and another of honey. That'd do, he decided, and settled in to wait.
Either Bunny had been in the sauna for a while before Jack's return, or he wasn't lingering like he normally did. It wasn't long after Jack settled down at the table before Bunny stepped out of the bathroom, fur starting to puff out as it dried.

Bunny paused in the doorway, eyes wide. "Jack?"

Jack grinned, and leaned back on his chair. "Hey, Cottontail," he said, his throat suddenly tight. His thinking had been flawed, before. Home wasn't just a place. This, Bunny, sharing his space, this was home. "What're you doing with the garden?"

Bunny crossed the short distance, and pulled Jack up into his arms. The hug was warm, Bunny's grip strong, and his fur was soft against Jack's cheek and nose. Smelt a little, too; like hot rocks and a little like wet dirt, and the cedar used to keep the clothes in the closet smelling good.

"Hey," he said, and hugged back with all the strength he could. "Miss me?"

The Pooka nuzzled against Jack's ear, and hummed. "I dunno," he said, sounding nonchalant. It might even have passed muster, except for how tightly he was clinging. "It was kinda nice, not having you snoring in my ear every night."

Jack poked his finger into Bunny's side. "I don't snore."

"Sure you don't," Bunny said, and pulled back a little. Just a little. Jack could hardly wiggle with how tightly Bunny held him, but he couldn't bring himself to mind.

"What's all this, mate?" Bunny asked, and nodded to the table.

Jack hummed, and snuggled back into the hug. "I saw what'd you'd done to the garden. New plantings?"

"Well, there's more veg that could grow here than you've got, and even some fruit… Do you mind?" Bunny sat down, and the second Jack's butt hit the chair, he found a large foot hooked around his ankle. He grinned, and reached over to cover Bunny's hand with his right.

"I'm okay. Still a couple of bad moments, but not about my arm. And of course I don't mind. Garden's pretty much yours, anyways."

Bunny nodded, and smiled. "Well, did you have fun?"

Jack thought back over the past two months, and if his smile was a little wry, well… "Some of it. It was interesting, anyways. I'd, uh, tell you, but…"

Bunny waved it off. "It's fine, there's stuff about Pooka ceremonies I'd keep quiet about, if there was anyone to do them with."

Well, as long as there weren't any hurt feelings… "So, you gonna eat?" Jack challenged. "Or do I have to clean all this up by myself?"

Their second group meeting was already a thousand times better than their last, and it'd only been five minutes.

Jack perched on his staff, at his ease, a small handbag of sand in his right hand. Rabbit, the evil taskmaster that he was, had given Jack several exercise to work on his dexterity and fine motor control. Jack was pretty sure that as least two-thirds, maybe three-fourths, were actually meant as
pickpocketing practice.

Tooth entered through the skylight, caught sight of him, and squealed. Jack braced himself, and just in time. A tiny, feathery rocket slammed into him, and if not for the magic involved with his staff, he'd have been knocked flying. As it was, he rocked backwards until he was at a gravity-defying angle - well, more than usual - and then back up.

"Hey, Tooth," he said, and tucked the handball into his sweater pocket. He patted her on the back, and made faces at Sandy, who was quite obviously laughing at him. "I'm fine now, promise. How're you?"

"Annoyed," she said, and pulled back. He held up his hands once there was room, wiggling his fingers. When he'd gone off with the three guides, he hadn't been able to touch his right thumb to his right fingers; now, he could, though not as fast as he could with his left.

Tooth squealed again over his display, and then clutched his hands to her chest. "I'm so happy," she said, fairly glowing with it. "It's nice to have good news."

"Yes," North agreed, entering the room like some twenties movie star diva, arms spread wide and teeth gleaming in a big smile. "So very good to see you, Jack! You had us worried," he added, calming a bit from his entrance. Jack figured he was going to get slapped on the back, and he was sort of right; instead of a thwack, North just rested his hand on the span between Jack's shoulder blades, warm and heavy and somehow reassuring.

"I had myself worried, but I'm recovered now," he said. And mostly he was. He didn't want to think about the fight, or the sound the fearling's teeth had made against the bones in his shoulder, or about how close he'd come to turning into a fearling himself. For all that he didn't want to think about it, it was always there in the back of his mind. But at least he once again had a bone-deep confidence that he wasn't going to become a fearling.

He could live with the nightmares. The hallucinations, not so much.

Thank goodness Bunny had called the guides for help.

Bunny entered the room at that point, an elf dangling from one fist like a cackling Christmas decoration. "North," he growled, and wagged the elf in a pointed way. "Think this belongs to you?"

North's hand fell away from Jack's back. "Bunny, what…?"

"This thief," Bunny growled, turning a dark look on the elf, "took my sketchbook and hid it."

Jack hopped down off his staff, and slung it over one shoulder. "Which way did the little guy go?" he asked, and squinted at the elf. Barely a foot high, and that with the pointed hood and bell. So… hiding places since inches or lower, except that elves could get up into the rafters…

Bunny caught him by the hood, and kept him from wandering out the door. "You don't need to track him," he growled. "I just need North to get my sketchbook back!"


"This thief," Bunny growled, a grin at the world at large. The grin faded at North's stern look, and turned into a sulk when the Russian pointed at the door and snapped something that sounded like it had way too many consonants, and also vaguely angry. Not Russian, but related? Prussian? Maybe Ukrainian?
Bunny put the elf down, and it stomped towards the door, as much as a foot-high being could stomp, anyways. It was kind of cute, but Jack wasn't going to be the one to make that mistake. No sir, he liked his ankles un-stabbed, thanks.

"Sketchbook will be brought back shortly," North said, and gestured towards the chairs. "In meantime, perhaps we should begin?"

Jack followed Bunny to the chair, and grinned a little at the Pooka's grumbling. *That* word was definitely supposed to be Shawnee, and wasn't nearly as lewd as Bunny probably thought it was. The rest of it was in a variety of languages that he didn't recognize offhand.

"Why'd you bring it?" Jack asked, settling onto half of a loveseat. Bunny looked like he was considering a chair, but he sat down beside Jack after a moment's consideration. "Were you planning a lot of drawing?"

Bunny sighed, and rolled his eyes. "Mapping. Notes. Last time there were fearlings about it was all across Europe, but not all the time all at once, yeah? It'd be… whatever it was called, is it still France?" Jack nodded, grinning. "Right, it'd be France one week, and then he'd be off terrorizing the Visigoths, and then the Danes, and on and on. Didn't help that humans kept changing their country names and borders every couple of years."

"Yes, yes," North soothed. Jack probably should've done that, but he was too busy giggling at Bunny's disgruntled expression. "But fearlings are staying all in one place right now. Maps are probably not necessary."

Bunny folded his arms. "You think."

Jack shifted and stretched, until he could tuck his toes under Bunny's thigh. The Pooka jumped, and gave him a sour look, but didn't protest.

Tooth, for some reason, looked delighted. "Boys," she said. "Shouldn't we get started?"

"Fine. What've you found?" Bunny crossed his arms, scowl firmly in place. Jack maybe understood why Tooth was so pleased; Bunny in a grump was *adorable*. Like that grumpy cat meme from 2012. Only bigger, of course.

"DRC," North said, Sandy helpfully showing the outline of a country. It was vaguely familiar, but must've been an inland country. Without a shoreline, Jack had no clue where this DRC was supposed to be.

Bunny made a vaguely aggrieved gesture. Tooth cleared her throat, lips pinched together. "The Democratic Republic of the Congo? One of the biggest countries in Africa?" At that, Bunny's expression cleared, and he nodded. Tooth looked over to Jack, still visibly confused. "You don't know much about the Congo, do you?"

"Wasn't there a war?" he asked. That seemed like a safe assumption; he was pretty sure there'd been wars in Africa since the Europeans returned several thousand years after they'd last left. Probably wars even before that, but he couldn't remember.

"You could say that," North said. "Though things have settled down now that they have new president. Second new president. Little loss of territory, great gain in becoming world power!"

"Second largest rainforest in the world," Bunny mused, and hummed. "Fearlings are around there, huh?"
Tooth nodded.

"Jack, what about a hothouse?"

After a few seconds, Jack rolled his eyes. "Seriously, you go from fearlings here to hothouse? I thought transplanting stuff is bad!"

Bunny swatted at his knee. "Its plants, not a koala, mate."

"You can figure out how to make it, and yeah, sure. Just not during fearling hunting."

Totally worth it to see Bunny's smile, Jack decided… though if they had to transplant any bugs for pollinating the flowers, that’d be Bunny's thing, too. Now, where could they put the hothouse… wait, no, focus.

Sandy was beaming at them. Jack squinted at him. That seemed vaguely suspicious…

"Ever since the cobalt rush, DRC had had world monopoly," North explained. "Took some doing, getting honest politicians in place, but is very, very good place to live now! Almost as good as Russia, if too warm," he added. Jack rolled his eyes.

"Right, I remember now. First country to switch to solar power with the new arrays, right?"

Sandy nodded, and flashed a few images. Which, fair enough; solar power in Africa was of course going to outperform practically every other power generator, once the kinks were worked out. Still, there were only a few major holdouts against swapping to the safer power source. Canada, strangely, was one of them. Maybe they were trying to find a way to turn maple syrup into electricity.

"So… honest politicians, world power, wouldn’t that make it kinda… useless for Pitch and fearmongering?" Jack asked.

"You would think so, but fearlings are there. Fearlings are in fact in deep jungle, where humans are staying out." At Jack's expression, North snorted. "Once upon time, researchers suffered for their work. Now, they send the little UAVs and the drones to plant cameras. Then watch from comfort of living room couch, probably."

Jack snorted again. "Awesome. So, are we going to attack, or…?"

Tooth glanced between North and Sandy, and then shrugged. "Pitch hasn't been seen with them."

"No point in going after the fearlings," Bunny said, shifting a little to better look at Jack. It also uncovered Jack's toes, which was simply rude. Jack tucked them under the crook of Bunny's knee, and then nodded.

"Okay, listening."

Bunny pursed his lips. "So what'd the Natives do to you, again?"

"There was some beating with pine boughs," Jack lied, "but it was a purification ceremony and that makes it okay."


"He said a bough, not a tree," Tooth murmured back.

Jack stared Bunny dead in the eye, and deadpanned, "I love my friends."
Bunny snorted, and wrapped a hand around Jack's ankle. "So. No point in going after the fearlings, if Pitch isn't there. The fearlings are like his guard dogs, only the dogs that're beaten and starved to make them mean. Except what they eat is fear, so they have to make people afraid…"

Jack nodded.

"Only thinking fearling is a fearling prince, and that takes special work on Pitch's part," Bunny said. "And I don't think he ever succeeded in changing a human?" He looked over at Sandy, one ear tilted in inquiry.

Sandy nodded, his signs meaning something to Bunny even if Jack couldn't make heads or tails of them.

"Right. Last one used to be a Luminary - Pitch's species," he elaborated. "Nothing else ever worked long-term, the fearling prince died on its own even if it wasn't killed right off."

"So, fearlings in the Congo, no Pitch, fearlings aren't currently hurting anyone, better to find Pitch and thump him with a mallet?" Jack summed up.

Tooth sighed. "Essentially. Right now, we're taking turns keeping an eye on the fearlings and looking for Pitch."

Jack nodded, and turned to Bunny. "Yeah, no plant samples until after the hothouse is built."

Chapter End Notes

Jack is back, and feeling better! Yay! (While I could've tormented him emotionally some more, it would've slowed the plot (yes there's a plot) down a lot.) And yes, Bunny's picked up some of Jack's curses. Alas, he doesn't know that it's the equivalent of saying "oh sugar sticks!" but it's probably better for a child's innocent ears...
Aster wasn't quite sure what to do with Jack, now that he'd returned. Jack had a nightmare at least once every night, but he was never so lost on waking that he thought his arm was changing. He worked on his exercises every day, lifting bags weighted with sand, stretching, and working with that hand-ball. He smiled, he laughed, and if at times he seemed sad or angry, it was hard to blame him.

Aster was happy. He was himself. He just thought it safest to remain a bit cautious about this good turn, especially when they were hunting fearlings.

He was elbow deep in designing the hothouse when Jack popped in with a thing of tea and plate of cookies.

"Ta," Aster said, stretching up before accepting a mug. He'd been working most of the morning, but most of his aches were from their work yesterday, prowling the African rainforest. It'd been a lot of stalking fearlings and avoiding cameras, though he'd noticed Jack waving and making faces at a couple during the odd quiet moment.

The fearlings had been acting strangely, something Sandy had confirmed when he'd shown up to take over the watch. They hadn't been searching out their food; rather they'd been acting almost like gorillas, making rough nests and moving around in a group. There were only six of them, and Aster couldn't quite work up the usual enraged grief; a quiet pity was about all he could manage.

Jack offered a jar of honey, and Aster dumped four spoonfuls into his mug. "How yadoin', then?" he asked.

The winter spirit rolled his eyes. "Dare you to talk stereotypical Australian at North at our next group meeting," he said. "I'm fine, I was contorting a lot less than you were yesterday."

"Yay, flight," Aster deadpanned.

"I could carry you next time."

No. He shuddered. "I'll pass. But you are alright, yeah?"

Jack scowled, and then shrugged. "If they'd been acting like the one I'd fought, I'm sure there would've been trouble. But they were pretty calm, considering, and besides. I was in the air."

Right. Aster didn't get it himself, but then, he didn't fly. Most folks who flew tended to feel safer in the air, he'd found. It wasn't like it made them any safer, but he wasn't going to argue.

Jack seemed more interested in swirling his tea around and around in the cup. Aster kept a careful eye on him, even as he went back to his hothouse planning. This design was probably a little big; Jack was only giving him so much space by the kitchen garden, but it was rather fun designing planting layouts and levels.

"What do you think Pitch is doing?" Jack asked, suddenly enough Aster's hand jerked. Thankfully his hand jerked up off the paper; he was using inks. Those didn't erase.
"Dunno." He peered at his layout, and then set it aside. It was starting to look more like a tiger's habitat than an indoor garden. "Didn't you set him up with that one winter spirit?"

"Marzie?" Jack rolled his eyes. "I didn't figure she'd keep him for long, and last I heard she's single again. Still, he was quiet for, what, twenty years? Almost thirty? Without sealing him away and everything."

"Congratulations." He almost expected sand to fall from his mouth, his voice was so dry.

Jack grinned, and took a swig of his tea. "Anyways, I doubt Marzie impressed on him the need to be good or anything. But he's also not bossing around his fearlings, and you think he would. They're not hunting, unless you count looking for fruit."

Not that the fearlings had eaten the fruit; just chewed on it a lot. "You think he might've lost control of them?"

Jack shrugged. "How should I know? But I figure if we can find out what Pitch is up to…"

"Fearlings on their own are harmless, if they're not feeding." Jack rubbed his shoulder with a wince. "Well," Aster amended, "relatively. Any ideas on how to find Pitch?"

Jack stared down into his mug of tea, and nodded. "Actually," he said, "I kinda do. Have you ever visited Mother Nature before?"

Aster folded his arms, ears flat against his head and shoulders hunched. "You're sure about this?" he asked. One didn't just walk into Mother Nature's domain, after all. She was one of the most powerful spirits, if not the most powerful, and didn't suffer fools lightly. Granted, he was older, but considering the state of his magic…

"Of course I'm sure," Jack said, and gestured at the rippling curtain of energy. "I talk to her plenty. She said she considers you a friend."

She what now? Aster scowled; he wouldn't put it past Jack to put words in another person's mouth, yet… this person? "Alright," he said. "Let's go."

"So enthused," Jack said, on the tail end of a sigh. He reached for Aster's hand, and frowned. "C'mon, grab on, we discussed this."

Right. Jack had only ever visited alone, and had no idea if Mother Nature's domain worked the way other ones did, where if they weren't in physical contact they'd be separated and seemingly half a world apart.

Aster grabbed hold of Jack's hand, and nodded. "Ready."

"Great." Jack tugged him forwards, and they stepped through the curtain in unison.

The wash of power staggered him a second, and then another source of power surged forward, crackling over his fur like static. The first power had been - all the shades of green, he thought, muzzy-headed. Everything from the first off-white sprouts from a seed to the dark, near black of old pines and some mosses. The second…

He looked over at Jack, aware of the wonder in his expression but unable to do anything about it. He'd felt Jack's magic before, sometimes strongly, sometimes a gentle brush against him, but nothing like that.
"Sorry," Jack said, flushing faintly. "Sometimes that happens."

Aster nodded, unable to find any words, everything he could say struck from his mind. Then he looked around, and he did find words.

They just weren't very nice ones.

Jack let go of his hand, which Aster had to say he appreciated; made it worlds easier to pace and swear and even pick up a rock and throw it. That was the end of the rant, the rock. He didn't normally get so angry that he threw things.

He folded his arms, and glared up at the yellow sky. "If this was supposed to be a nice gesture," he said, pain making his voice shake, "mark's been missed."

Jack pressed one hand between Aster's shoulder blades, but thankfully stayed quiet. It took a moment, but Aster slowly lowered his eyes, looking over the scenery.

Jack had warned him, but he'd been expecting an earthly landscape. Not this knife from the past. The earth was a rich, deep red, like ripe strawberries. The sparse grass shaded between emerald and aqua, the tips a brilliant sapphire. The sky was yellow, the air hazy with it. There were rocks scattered about, in shades of blue that stood out against the red brilliantly. Off in the distance, he could see what might have been a dome covering a city for alien visitors.

"I grew up here," he said, trembling. Pain or anger or grief; didn't know, didn't care. Wanted to punch something. "Homes were all underground, 'cause otherwise the heat could get to you. Death Valley might come close, but it's gotta work for it."

"Bunny…" Jack shifted, and his forehead joined his hand against Aster's back. "I don't think she meant to hurt you…"

"No, probably not." He stared at a tree, at once familiar and not, and swallowed down a pained keen. That was the right shade of amaranthine in the bark, the leaves that particularly rich shade of auzuline. Shades he'd never seen on Earth, shades he hadn't even realized he'd hungered to see until now.

And it was wrong, so wrong. This had all been destroyed. And even if it hadn't been, this was earth . Trees that needed a certain amount of Sulphur in the air didn't do well with oxygen. He'd tried. All his attempts had died, and then he'd run out of seed pods.

"Hey." Jack stepped around, until he could peer up into Aster's eyes. "She'll change it. It's hurting you, she'll change it. But we've gotta talk to her first."

"Yeah," Aster breathed, and bent down until he could press his muzzle against Jack's hair. The air didn't smell like it was supposed to, but Jack smelt like pine and cedar and cold, and for the moment that was enough, had to be enough. "Alright. How do we find her?"

Jack pulled away and shrugged. "Find a trail, walk until she gets tired of waiting and brings us to her."

"You're joking." Walk, through this? He managed not to shiver, but it was a near thing.

"I wish," Jack grumbled, turning and looking around. "Sometimes I fly, but that always seems to take longer. That look like a track to you?"

Yes, like the one between the alien's city and his home village. He nodded, and reached out to grab
Jack by the hand when he moved to walk forward.

"I need…" He swallowed, and shifted until he was holding Jack's hand again. This. He needed this, the contact, the way Jack's fingers were just slightly cooler than the rest of his body. Otherwise this trip was going to be very difficult.

Thankfully, Jack understood, as he seemed to understand so many things without Aster verbalizing them. "It's okay, Cottontail," he said, and squeezed Aster's hand. "Let's go."

The walk was an interesting brand of torture, in Aster's opinion. Everything that he'd wished to have, just one more time… and now it was like shards of glass in his lungs, every breath he took. Somehow, some when, he'd come to accept the loss of his planet, if not his people; what would've been a fond memory from an image capture was anything but now that he was walking through it.

Every step was just… wrong. A wrongness that just didn't stop. It was easier to narrow his focus down to Jack, the clasp of hand in hand, the way Jack's hair waved in the faintest of breeze and the stretch and wrinkle of cotton-soft fabric over Jack's shoulders and around his torso.

Jack made a surprised sound, and Aster looked up, just in time to see everything blur, the ground humping up and falling down in places. It made his eyes ache, and he clenched them shut for nearly a full minute.

When he opened his eyes, things had settled; the land had changed from Pookan native, to Earth. Seaside, he thought, not a beach so much as a rocky shore.

"Huh," Jack said. "Been a while since I've seen her do Iceland."

"At least it's not Pookan," Aster muttered.

Jack pointed ahead, where the earth humped up into a grass and moss covered cliff. "Bench," he said, and once he'd pointed it out Aster could see it, blackened wood against the dark gray and brown.

It was a little strange walking along the shore; Jack swapped sides so Aster was closer to the water, just to start. The rocks varied in size from as small as Aster's fist to as big as his head, and while mostly they were solid underfoot, every few steps there'd be one that wasn't, and he'd stumble and lurch from side to side in surprise. Jack didn't seem to have the same problem, but it could have simply been experience with this sort of thing, he supposed. Jack had recognized the place, after all.

The bench was made out of stone, not wood, and was in the perfect spot to sit and admire not just the iceberg not far off at sea, but the other side of what Aster suspected was a fjord. There was a waterfall, brilliant blue-white against the green cliffs, and it was far enough distant that it was nothing but a gentle, constant purr.

"We should come here for real, sometime," Jack said, and shifted so he wasn't sitting on the bench, but lying on it, his head pillowed in Aster's lap. "You'd like it, especially in summer. I probably wouldn't complain too much about carrying your paints and stuff."

Meaning Jack thought Aster would want to do at least one, probably several paintings. "You know where it is?" he asked, instead of answering that.

"There's a lighthouse now," he said, eyes closed. Aster began running his nails through Jack's hair. The winter spirit hummed and smiled. "And walking tours. But Iceland hasn't changed that much, and even if it's not this exact one, there's one practically just like it that I know about."
"Well, maybe," Aster said. Jack smirked, and hummed when Aster began to stroke his hair. Aster stared out over the water, thinking.

It was almost peaceful here, but with the memory of the Pookan terrain still so fresh, he couldn’t trust it. At any second the water might shift from a steel-blue shade to amethyst, the dark gray rocks crumble into amber sand. He wasn't sure how he'd be able to handle that.

If everything had been exactly the way he'd remembered, would it be better or worse? As it was, the recreation had been too quiet, missing the ambient sounds he remembered from his childhood. The vegetation had hummed with the slightest breeze over their leaves, not the rustling sounds on Earth. And there'd always been insects chirping and clicking away. The silence might have been worse than the familiar sights, now he was over the initial shock.

He sighed, and watched the iceberg as it drifted along, never going too far from the fjord mouth. As if in reply, Jack sighed as well, shifting to press his cheek against Aster's stomach.

Aster wasn't sure exactly how long he sat there, but at some point he felt… watched. The fur along the back of his neck and shoulders began to prickle. He was too wary to do anything obvious like look around, but with a bit of shifting around and seeming to look down at Jack, he was able to peer back over his shoulder without being too obvious about it.

Nothing. Whoever, whatever was making him feel watched, he couldn’t see it. Didn't mean it wasn't there, but he couldn't see it.

If he'd been alone, he probably would've bolted, done his best to find the exit and leave. This was, after all, Mother Nature's domain. She was powerful, a bit fickle, and was just the sort of person to have kept a bunch of dinosaurs as pets.

… Why had he thought about dinosaurs?

"Jack," he whispered, and poked Jack in the nose until he whined and cracked one eye open.

"What?"

"Does she keep dinosaurs?"

That got both eyes open. "Who does what now?"

Aster frowned, and did another, careful look around. "Mother Nature. Does she keep dinosaurs?"

Jack blinked at him, and then sat up. "What are you talking about?"

"We're being watched." Forget subtly; he looked around for the watcher, and still saw nothing. "Fair unnerving," he grumbled, since Jack was looking at him like he'd grown another set of ears.

"She didn't keep dinosaurs. At least not living ones." Jack scratched under his chin, and shrugged. "Maybe DNA samples. Probably just her." With that, Jack pulled away and hopped up into the air, lifting several hundred feet up. After a minute, he dropped back down, settling on the bench with a dramatic roll of his eyes.

"Over there," he said, and gestured towards the far side of the fjord, by the waterfall.

Aster frowned, and peered at the waterfall. It took him a moment, and when he saw it, he about dropped his jaw, because… that hadn't been there before.
Another few seconds, and the distant image clarified, went blurry, and then clarified again, this time as a woman in an elaborate dress, walking across the wet rocks at the water's edge.

As the woman got closer, more and more details became clear. She was of average height, for a Luminary, which was itself tall for a human. Her hair was loose and dark in colour, and fell to her waist in loose curls. Her dress was something out of the Golden Age, looking a bit - now that he had Earth cultures to compare it to - like a Greek chiton, with aspects from the more elaborate ball gowns from the 1700's, only without the panniers.

She looked familiar. Not from Earth; it might have been the dress, but he was fairly certain he'd known her from… before. He just couldn't place it.

Either she was walking faster than he'd realized, or she'd folded the space between them so as to arrive faster, because she crossed the distance in seconds where it'd taken him and Jack minutes. She let him look his fill, smiling the entire time.

Her eyes distracted him; from corner to corner they were the star-studded darkness of the night sky. No one he'd ever knew had eyes like that.

"Hello, Aster," she said, and bowed her head. "It is good to see you again."

Well, that confirmed she knew him. There weren't many who knew his given name anymore. Pitch never did, and Sandy couldn't, and Manny… well, he supposed the others thought the flower was being used as a symbol for him, not as a name.

Aster just couldn't recognize her.

"You likely do not recall me," she said, eerily in time with his thoughts. "But you were once quite kind to me, when I was a little girl visiting your planet."

He stiffened, and stood up. "Emily Jane," he said, voice trembling. "I reckoned you were dead."

Kozmotis Pitchner had gone a bit mad against the dream pirates and shadow men, after all. Wife dead and girl vanished, it was reasonable to assume what had happened.

Clearly, a wrong assumption.

Mother Nature, Emily Jane - Pitch's daughter, the cause of his fighting, maybe if they'd found her all those years ago he wouldn't have been so mad to fight and kill, wouldn't have become the Golden General, wouldn't have betrayed and killed the Pooka - shrugged. "Yes," she said. "And no."

For a second Aster was confused, unsure if she was actually answering his thoughts or something else.

Jack spoke up, thankfully. "Yes you're Emily Jane?" he said. "Or no you're not?"

Mother Nature turned her attention to him. "Once, I was Emily Jane," she said. There was something wrong about her talking - no, Aster realized. About her animation. She had none. She stood still as a mannequin, not even appearing to breathe. "The dream pirates and shadow men changed me, until I was Seraphina. And then…" She gestured at the earth. "Now, I am new once more."

Jack cleared his throat. "You're several hundred thousand years old," he said.

"Well." Her smile was graceful and practiced and several degrees of wrong. "Metaphorically speaking."
Aster folded his arms across his chest. "This is all quite lovely," he drawled, "But we came to talk to you for a reason. Pitch -"

For a bare instant, her eyes were human. And angry. Then they were the spangled darkness once more, but the difference had rattled him. "No," she said. "Not Pitch. You wish to speak to me of the fearlings. Very well. We shall speak. But not here. Follow me, this is something best discussed more privately."

Jack was well aware he was missing about seventy percent of whatever undercurrents were running between Bunny and Mother Nature. He was reasonably okay with it. Whatever those undercurrents were, they had sharks running through them.

No, he preferred to distract himself by wondering just how you got even more private than Mother Nature's domain.

Apparently, more private involved a secret room - a domain within a domain, he thought. The thought was a little mindboggling, and not only because that was supposed to be impossible. It took a good chunk of power to create a domain. It probably took a lot more to create a second one inside the first. And so far as Jack was aware, at least in his own experience, the magic that went into creating the domain remained bound to it. It was one of the reasons why most spirits didn't bother; they might have been strong enough, but it would have taken all their power to do it.

Kitsune might've been an exception, now that he thought about it. After the first century they were always creating pocket dimensions, without any apparent loss of power. Something to consider…

Not that he needed access to that chuck of magic he'd tied up, at least not now, but who knew what'd happen in the future?

For right now, though…

Jack kept his mouth shut and his head down. Mother Nature's private domain was like some kind of living room crossed with a biologist's dream lab. Maybe nightmare lab. There were a lot of things with teeth lurking in the corners. And apparently a few with tentacles.

Bunny - Mother Nature had called him 'Aster', and called herself Seraphina and also Emily Jane, interesting - stood beside an overstuffed, somewhat chintzy armchair, looking cranky. It was not a familiar expression, Jack realized, though it had been once. These days, Bunny was more likely to look exasperated, at most annoyed. The grumpy furrow between his eyebrows and displeased set of his mouth… it wasn't right.

Jack shoved up out of his own armchair, and crossed what seemed to be at once three feet of carpet and twenty feet of linoleum. Bunny looked down at him, mouth pinched, and jumped when Jack pressed his hand to the small of Bunny's back, just above his tail. After a second, the unhappy light in his eyes eased, though he didn't entirely relax.

"Alright, Emily Jane," Bunny said. "Let's talk fearlings."

Mother Nature set out a plate of cookies and a pot of tea, with cups. The cookies were shaped like animals. Coiled snakes nestled next to smiling monkeys, and it was a little eerie how lifelike they looked.

"Let us talk Pooka instead."

"Why?"
Jack shifted to press sideways against Bunny. The Pooka was drawn tight as piano wire, and probably had at least as much explosive potential.

"Because of what he did," Mother Nature bit out, the starlit field in her eyes shifting, until Jack felt he was looking at a supernova. "To them. Did you never wonder where he got his replacements?"

Replacements…? Bunny glanced down just in time to see Jack's confusion, apparently, since he explained. "Fearlings, back then, were easier to kill. But he kept getting more." He looked up and glared at Mother Nature. "Turned his victims into them. But even if they weren't killed, the… transformed people died, eventually."

Transformed people? Jack considered what he'd been told about Bunny's history. Transformed Pooka.

… Wait a second, here…

"Most of his victims did," Mother Nature confirmed, the supernova in her eyes getting brighter. "Some did not."

Bunny was trembling. "Stop stalling."

"The fearlings, here on earth." She looked down at her hands. "They're Pooka."

Chapter End Notes

So who here expected this?
Aster blinked, and blinked again when a pale blur came into view. A bit more blinking, and the blur cleared up, clarified into Jack's face. What was Jack doing on the ceiling?

"I'm not on the ceiling," Jack said. "You're on the floor. And yes, you said that out loud."

He blinked again, harder this time. "Oh. Good." Why was that good? Oh, right. "Hate for you to read minds. Help me up?"

"Sure thing, Fur-belly." Jack caught Aster about the shoulders, and lifted as the Pooka pushed. They stopped once Aster was sitting up; the world was spinning around him, which was quite opposite to the proper order of things. Probably why he'd fainted, at that.

Once the spinning had subsided, Jack helped him stand, only long enough to sit down on a chair, the cushions stuffed so full they were uncomfortable. He looked around, recent memories trickling back. Mother Nature's domain. Emily Jane. The hidden center of her domain, and…

Right.

The Pooka.

He looked over at the woman, and swallowed. "Fearlings are Pooka?" he asked, unashamed of how his voice trembled. Jack offered his hand, and Aster grabbed it with both of his.

Mother Nature - it was impossible to think of her in any other way, he realized - looked sympathetic. "At best it is a working theory. Without a fearling to work on, I cannot confirm it as fact. However, genetic coding…" She shrugged. "You, and other Pooka, are alien to this world. Your genetic code is rather… distinct. As are the samples I have managed to acquire from the fearlings."

"How close would you say it is?" Jack asked. Aster squeezed his hand in thanks; at least one of them could talk.

Mother Nature blinked, and turned her attention to Jack. "I would judge, from my samples, a difference of half a percent between Aster's genetic coding and the fearlings. More than I would normally expect, between members of the same species, but less than there are between, for example, gorillas and humans. That is only one-point-six percent. With the fearling infection causing… interesting effects in the genetic coding, half a percent difference is astonishing. And quite suggestive."

"Could…" He had to stop and clear his throat. "Could the infection make 'em look more like Pooka?"

Half a second could feel like eternity.

"No. It cannot."

Aster wheezed, doubling over the invisible blow. Pooka. Stuck as fearlings. Pooka. His species. How was - what was - they had to, but he didn't know, he couldn't think, he -
Jack rested one hand on the back of Aster's head. It was immediately grounding. Aster was able to breathe again, his thoughts slowing down a touch from their frantic circling.

"So. Any ideas?"

He looked up in time to see Mother Nature smile. "Only preliminary. Perhaps we should all meet, I and you Guardians, to discuss matters and possibilities."

Jack nodded, and looked down at Aster. "Sounds good. In a week enough time? It'll be the full moon over the Arctic, and who knows. Maybe even the Moon'll speak up."

"You do not sound enthused." Mother Nature turned and poked at something on one of her work benches. Aster did his best not to cringe away; even for an Australian, that was just too many legs. Limbs. Possibly tentacles.

"Moon's not exactly a chatty guy," Jack said. "I don't expect much conversation out of him. So, a week?"

She nodded, and picked up the... thing, whatever it was. "I will see you then. And Aster..." The stars faded from her eyes, and he was reminded of a young girl, excited and a little frightened by what she could see of the Pookan landscape. "We will save them. This, I promise."

Jack nodded, hand sliding down to cup the back of Aster's neck, squeezing gently. "C'mon, Cottontail. Let's get back home. Any fast track to the outside?" he asked, looking up at Mother Nature.

Thankfully, she seemed amused. Aster didn't want to know what she'd do if Jack's casual nature had irked her. "Through that door," she said, pointing across the room. The creature in her hand waved two... limbs... and made an odd, gurgling sound. "And I've a suggestion, if you will take it."

"Oh?" Aster stood up. His knees were a little wobbly, but he felt alright. It'd been a shock, and was currently a horror, but... he had hope. That made all the difference.

"Fearlings are so because they are altered to feed off fear, and exude it. It is a magic transformation, and like all such curses, breaking them is theoretically quite difficult, but in reality easy, at least in method. Straightforward perhaps would be a better word..." She stroked the many-limbed creature, and shrugged. "What curse is upon the fearlings, and what would therefore free them?"

"I think that's more a North thing than me or Bunny," Jack said, sounding dubious. "He's the wizard."

Mother Nature shrugged again, and seemed to focus on her creature. "As you like. Gooday, Jack. Aster. I will see you both in a week's time."


He made it out the door and through the curtain of magic before he staggered, falling sideways against a tree. He couldn't for the life of him have said what kind of tree, or what area of the world they were in; all he knew was that he couldn't stay upright without support and there was a tree with rough bark providing it.

Jack shifted so he was standing in front of Aster, their hands still clasped together. He was probably clutching Jack's hand just a little too hard, he thought, but he couldn't make his fingers loosen.
"Bunny?" Jack leaned his staff up against the tree, and reached up with his now free hand. He stroked the fur on Aster's cheek, the contact so gentle, so worried, that he could have cried. A few tears might have leaked out of the corners of his eyes.

"They're Pooka," he gasped, and bowed his head. They were Pooka, and he'd never known, never suspected - he'd killed fearlings, how many of them had been transformed Pooka? Fearlings went after kids more often, did that mean he'd - that they were kits, that -

"Bunny!" He was on the ground again, knees in the dirt, forehead pressed to Jack's shoulder. Jack had his hands in Aster's fur, the grip almost painful, but grounding with it. He grabbed Jack's sweater, and clung.

He was just so cold. And he couldn’t stop shaking.

The fearlings were Pooka.

Why was that thought so terrifying? He should have been happy. He wasn't the last, wasn't alone, wasn't - there were other Pooka, would be, they’d rescue them, but -

"Bunny, breathe," he heard. Jack sounded like he was repeating himself. Aster gasped, and turned to press his nose against the soft skin under Jack's ear. Every breath was tinted with the familiar scent, and it… helped. Jack was his best mate, his cobber, was right here offering all the comfort he could.

"I'm breathing," he mumbled, and smiled, just a twitch of his lips, at Jack's answering huff.

"Could've fooled me. Alright. You good?"


He should have insisted on going to see the others, should have - but he couldn't. His mind just turned to static at the thought of talking to the others, of telling them the fearlings - the Pooka - he just couldn’t.

Jack stared up into his eyes. "You want me to handle telling the others?" he asked. "I can do it at North's, if you need a bit of… quiet."

Aster sighed, and leaned forward until he could nuzzle into Jack's embrace. For a winter spirit, his touches were warm, and so comforting. Not for the first time, he had to wonder at Jack being one of the most dangerous winter spirits around, because he certainly didn't act like it.

"I don't know," he admitted. "I just… want to go home." So desperately.

Jack nodded, and stood up. "Think you can open a tunnel to Burgess?" he asked. "I could always fly us…"

"No." He shuddered. No and no again. Flying was for species with wings, and Pooka had never been born with those particular appendages. He'd do as was proper; keep his feet on the ground unless and until there were proper, Pookan-made star-craft to explore the universe with again.

Star-craft that might be possible once more… He tapped open a tunnel, and waved Jack in first. It was just easier that way. Jack looked around the bigger space, grinning at the flowers and sunbeams. The tunnel was bright and cheerful, and it was easier to walk side by side instead of racing towards Burgess. Aster reached for Jack's hand, and clutched tight, using the contact to help ground him, corral his racing thoughts into a semblance of calm.
Jack glanced up at him from time to time, but otherwise seemed content to amble along the tunnel. He looked like quite the picture, all cool blues and whites against the brighter greens and various flower colours, and focusing on the different shades, the way Aster would sketch the image, helped as well. If the odd, half-formed thought about fearlings and kittens gained strength, he just focused on the way the light reflected and refracted off Jack's hair, or the contrast between his dark blue sweater and the bright, mint-green leaves of a sprouting black locust branch.

"You know," Jack said, reaching out to brush his fingertips against a lily of the valley's leaves. "I can always make my domain bigger. If you wanted us to have neighbors."

Aster blinked, and stopped walking. It took Jack a second to catch on, but he seemed amicable to the pause, a half-smile curving his lips. "You'd make your domain bigger?"

"If you wanted, yeah. Might be interesting. Though I'll leave transplanting any trees and stuff to you, Mr. High and mighty gardener."

"Jack…" Aster shook his head, and didn't know whether he wanted to laugh, or cry, or some combination of both. "Let's… let's worry about that later, yeah? Cart's currently ahead of the horse right now. And, uh. The Warren was supposed to…"

Jack pursed his lips, and started walking again. "There's actual water there, right?" he asked, thumb sweeping back and forth across Aster's knuckles. "Because pretty as it is, I'm reasonably certain you're not supposed to drink paint. Right?"

It was impossible not to chuckle, so he didn't even try to stifle it. "Right. And yes, there's actual water. Springs, mostly, and spots for wells." He looked off to the side, and felt as if the light beaming through the tunnel was illuminating him, too. With luck, skill, planning, and skilled execution, there'd be Pooka in the Warren. There'd be those wells. The half-dug burrows he'd started would be finished. Maybe even families.

He grinned down at Jack, feeling almost like skipping. Almost .

He wasn't the last. There were other Pooka. It was…

It was something to smile about.

Jack absolutely wasn't worried about Bunny, not one little bit.

He was terrified. That was different .

"So," North rumbled, knuckles gone white with his grip on his mug. "These fearlings are transformed Pooka?"

Jack shrugged, and stared into his own mug. Honeyed milk with cinnamon and nutmeg. A very tasty treat, but not much for calming the butterflies setting up home in his stomach. "Mother Nature's pretty sure. Kinda hard to argue with her."

Except there was that little niggle of doubt. He didn't even know why; maybe just that this was the first anyone had ever suggested the fearlings were actually transformed Pooka. Every other time, apparently, transformed people had sickened and died. Why would the Pooka be any different? He couldn't help but come up with theory after theory about how these fearlings were mimics of Pooka - everything from this being some elaborate plot of Pitch's, to fearlings taking aspects of people they'd killed or… however they went about ingesting fear. He had no idea how likely any of those theories were, and really, Mother Nature was probably right. Less than a percent of difference between
Bunny's genetic code and the fearlings was a pretty strong argument.

And yet. Doubt.

Maybe it was nothing more than just… not wanting to see Bunny be disappointed. This was huge, after all. Jack was never going to forget finding Bunny curled up in the mud those years ago. The loss of his people had resulted in a loss of Bunny's own hope. Now, these fearlings were supposed to be his people, transformed, and it was obvious that he was hoping again.

"Jack?"

He shook his head, and looked up. "Sorry. Wool gathering. What was that?"

North leveled a sympathetic look at him. "Was asking if you had any thoughts towards this fearling curse Mother Nature referenced."

Jack snorted. "I barely know what fearlings even are," he pointed out. "I always figured they were like his nightmares, only more so. More powerful, not made of sand… But still, condensed shadows or something." He rubbed at his arm, and grimaced. "Well…"

"So did I," North admitted. "Mind, I did know fearlings could infect others. And change them. But all those changed have sickened, so the ones that did not die, I thought, were the old, pure ones."

"Live and learn." Jack sipped at his treat, and shifted to stare out the study window. "So, why don't you tell me what fearlings are?"

North leaned back in his chair, the piece of furniture groaning a bit at the shift in weight. "Well. That is a good question. The first fearlings, they were originally shadow men and dream pirates, from what little I have been told. But in the prison - you know of the prison?" Jack nodded. "Good. The prison supposedly turned them into little more than shadows, creatures that thrived off fear."

North stroked his beard, clearly thinking. Jack let him do so without interruption, and sipped at his drink. "You know," the old Russian mused, "that suggests all fearlings began from living creatures… But without initial infection. Wonder if that has something to do with it?"

"Maybe all the fearlings sickened and died, at different rates," Jack suggested. "No one realized at first because they were infecting and creating more, at a faster rate than they were getting sick."

"Always possible. Pity all our information is second and third-hand. Sometimes through Sandy's pictures."

Jack hummed in agreement. Not that Sandy's way of communicating was bad or anything, but it did take time to learn the nuances. Jack was getting better, but he was pretty sure Sandy was keeping to the level of, well, baby talk with him, still.

"Mother Nature said a curse, though. Wonder if something happened at the prison? I mean, there's always stories. Selling your soul to the devil, or to a wandering demon, or something."

North muttered something in Russian; whatever it was seemed to be amused, if his smirk meant anything. He sobered quickly though, and nodded. "You are not wrong. And dream pirates and shadow men were not… kindest of people. Such as those might make deal, or oath, or even partake in magic ritual to give unforeseen power in exchange for… who knows. Souls? Bodies?" He shrugged.

"Problem is, we don't know."

"Problem is, we don't know." Jack frosted his mug over, and then let it melt from the room's ambient
heat. Once the last bit of frost was gone, he frosted it again, studying the intricate fractal patterns. "I guess if we had a fearling ."

"Hah!" North slammed his mug down, and hooted in amusement. "There! You have it! We must get ourselves a fearling!"

Jack nearly dropped his mug. "Get a - have you lost your mind ?"

Fortunately for the old Russian, North sobered up a bit and leveled a calm stare at Jack. "My friend. I know you have no wish to see any more fearlings, after what happened. In truth, you are not the only person to have faced them before now. Yet if we are to cure the Pooka of their transformation, we must make study of the magic on them."

True. Very true. He set his mug aside before he froze the contents, and rubbed at his elbow. Then his shoulder. "You're right." He didn't have to like it, but North was right. "So. We're going to have a planning session?"

"Yes," North said, leaning back in his chair again. "But first I think I will have to contact some old friends. You have heard of them, I am sure, but not spoken to them. Ombric, Katherine, and Nightlight."

Jack raised his eyebrows, suitably distracted from the thought of fearling hunting. "Uh, your teacher, honorary sister, and her boyfriend, right?"

North snorted at the word 'boyfriend', but nodded. Jack carefully kept his expression from changing, but he really wanted to grin. North was cranky his little sister had a boyfriend , such fun . Bunny probably knew already, but Jack would have to tell him anyways.

"When do you think they'll show?" he asked.

"I will set off aurora when they arrive. Two weeks, three? And I will tell Tooth about it, if you tell Sandy."

Jack waved one hand. "Sure, you get the hyper one who tries to flirt with your teeth, give me the guy who's gonna go off like fireworks. Yeah, I'll catch him on my way back home, it should be night over North America now."

North blushed, and grinned. "I should note, Tooth only flirts with your teeth. She flirts directly with me ."

"The two of you are adorable, and Tooth owes me a free toothbrush for all the sugar," Jack said, and finished off his milk and honey. "Right, I'm going. See you in a few weeks."

Chapter End Notes

Don't you people love it when I stay up past midnight to post a chapter? -bows- You're welcome. Not much commentary on this one, but let me just say certain people, and you know who you are, have been listening to me cackle and plot. So, you know, get ready, because I do like me my hurt-comfort. Excuse me while I wander off and edit some tags...
Sandy wasn't quite as easy to track down as Jack had implied, but it also wasn't like he was searching the entire planet. The thing about the Sandman was, his dreamsand could be anywhere and everywhere it was night, but he himself? Not so much.

Unless the sand was actually part of his body, which suggested some strange and potentially worrying things about those nightmares Pitch had.

Jack spotted the dreamweaver, and whistled. The wind dropped him at once, and he fell something like five hundred feet before it caught him again, spinning him around like a top to bleed off the momentum.

"Hey, Sandy," he said, when he came to a hover. Sandy beamed, and held up two number tens. Jack bowed. "Thank you, thank you. Can I pull up a cloud? Got some stuff to talk to you about."

Sandy nodded, and gestured at his sand-cloud until there was enough room for Jack to sprawl out on it. He settled down, and stalled by looking up at the moon, currently a mere sliver of a crescent. "It's about the fearlings," he said, and looked down at Sandy.

Sandy nodded, his smile fading. He managed to arrange himself cross-legged, though it looked like it should have been uncomfortable for him. He just didn't have very long legs. He nodded, leaning forward slightly, as though encouraging Jack to stop stalling and start talking.

Actually, he probably was.

"Bunny and I went to talk to Mother Nature," Jack said.

Sandy showed an image of a small child, and then a somewhat older girl, and finally a grown woman covered in what seemed to be flowering vines. Jack nodded. "Yeah, her. She, uh, she'd been looking into the fearlings already, I guess."

Probably for a few years, now that he thought about it. His last visit, after all… it'd been creepy terrain and she'd been angry about what Pitch had done to the - oh. She must have found out then, or begun to suspect.

Sandy waved a hand, and gestured for Jack to continue. Right, conversation. "So, uh. The fearlings. Mother Nature found out - well, there's a few differences, but - genetically, they're Pooka."

Sandy blinked, the edge of the sand-cloud crumbling. Then his expression firmed, eyes narrowed and lips pursed. His images went by quickly, but Jack thought he got the gist of it. "Well, I don't know. We have a few theories, but North thinks we need a fearling to study."

Sandy scowled. "Just study, not dissect, sheesh."

Sandy stopped scowling, and nodded. His next image was of a distinctly Pookan shape and a flower followed by an egg. "Bunny… he's doing okay? I mean, he's very…" Jack made a see-saw motion with his hand. "He doesn't want to be disappointed, but the thought he might not be the last?" He shrugged.

At that, the dreamweaver looked thoughtful, before nodding. He made several signs, which Jack,
after a bit of squinting, took to be a question. "You want to come visit with Bunny?" he asked. Sandy nodded again, beaming at Jack's deciphering the unfamiliar signs, probably.

Jack hummed, and gestured towards Burgess. "The gate's over there. I'll... Hm. I should start making keys for the place, really. How about I leave one with Jamie in a couple of days? I've got to carve them first."

Sandy patted Jack on the head, and flashed an image of a key, and then a question mark.

"Well, I don't know if it'll be an actual key, but I'll tell Jamie when I drop it - them - off." A key - key seemed a little too obvious, at that. He'd have to talk to Bunny, see what he thought. Though, now that Bunny was on his mind... "Sandy," he said, and chewed his lip. "Mother Nature called Bunny something odd."

Sandy waggled a question mark, head tilted to the side.

"She called him Aster?"

Lightbulb, and a great, big smile. Jack couldn't help but smile back. Sandy might not be the easiest person to talk with - talk to was sometimes too easy - but he was super-expressive and always fun to hang around. Sandy nodded, and flashed several flowers that might've been daisies, but the petals seemed to be wrong. Too many of them, and they were too narrow.

"Y'know, I live with a gardener," Jack said, ignoring Sandy's not-so-subtle snicker and smirk, "but I can't actually recognize a plant by silhouette."

Sandy tapped a finger against his chin, and then nodded. He pointed at Jack, and then made an image that was probably supposed to be frost, except it wasn't on anything, just hanging in midair. He pointed at Jack again, and then at the image. Then he did a Bunny figure, and the flower, and pointed between them, nodding.

"Frost is part of my name," Jack mused. "Is Aster part of Bunny's name?"

Sandy nodded, and then flashed a number two.

"Yeah, you lost me."

Sandy rolled his eyes, and brought the images back up, the frost, Bunny figure, and flower - an aster of some kind, Jack supposed. He pointed at Jack, and then held up two fingers. A number two floated over the frost image. He pointed at Bunny, and held up three, and a number two flashed again, over the flower.

"Oh, it's his second name? Middle name?" Bunny Aster something? Jack shook his head. "Would asking bother him, you think?"

Sandy wrinkled his nose, and shook his head in the negative. Good. "You've got me curious now. Remember, two, three days at most, check in with Jamie for your key!"

Sandy nodded, and waved as Jack summersaulted backwards off the sand-cloud and fell, only for the wind to catch him and carry him off. He waved at Sandy, until the dreamweaver turned his attention back to his work and his back to Jack.

"Honey, I'm home!" Jack called, and then immediately cracked up laughing.
Aster rolled his eyes, wrist-deep in a new flower bed. "Your sense of humour needs work," he called, getting Jack's attention. "Round the back, mate."

Jack wasn't alone, he saw. North, Tooth, and Sandy were following along behind, grinning broadly or hiding a smile behind a hand, depending on the individual. He leveled an unimpressed stare at the lot of them, and sat back on his heels to brush the dirt off. "So," he said. "Planning session?"

"Planning session," North agreed, then turned and waved his arms like a maniac.

And like that, with a quick shimmer in the air, three people seemed to fade into view. Two men, both taller than average, the elder eye-level with North and the younger eye-level with Aster, and one young woman who seemed eager to contest Tooth for the title of 'shortest female Guardian', a previously honorary title. All three delightfully familiar.

"Are ya shitting me," Aster blurted, and lunged. Katherine laughed and grabbed on, while Ombric neatly sidestepped the hug and left Nightlight to flail on his own, face pressed somewhat ignobly into Aster's armpit. "Where'd you wankers come from?"

"Nightlight's work," Katherine said, pulling back just enough to beam up at everyone. "It has to do with light and refractions and reflections and air molecules and I don't even know what, honestly. It's so good to see you, Mr. Bunny!"

"Mister?" Jack repeated, turning to Tooth. Aster ignored him, as he ignored Nightlight's attempts at escape.

"Ah-ah, none of that now, lovie," he said, wagging one finger in Katherine's face. "None of that 'mister' stuff anymore. It was fine back when you were in short pants, but yer a grownup now and getta call me proper names."

"Fine," she said, and hugged him again. "Bunny. Mmmm, you smell like sunlight."

"Sunlight's got a smell?" Aster turned his attention to Nightlight, and scuffed up the boy's hair. "And what're you doing here, reprobate?"

Nightlight finally freed himself, and tried to smooth his hair down. A futile effort; like Jack, his hair was very fine, and currently floated about his head like dandelion fluff. "Katherine and I have been traveling together," he said, his voice near whisper-quiet. "I told you that when you left. And do I misremember, but are you more exuberant now than you were before?"

"Ah, is Jack's influence!" North crowed, and clapped Aster on the shoulder. He staggered into Katherine, who braced and just kept him from toppling over. "Jack is more serious -" He was? Since when? "- And Bunny much happier, better at showing it. Hah! And Ombric, you forgot to greet him. So rude," North said, with a sly waggle of his eyebrows.

"Well," Aster said, approaching the time traveler with his arms open. "Care for your greeting, ya old fraud?"

Ombric looked down his nose, the better to hide his twitching lips. "I think not, my leporidian friend."

Aster grinned, and approached faster. Ombric sidestepped around North, who immediately moved out of the way. Ombric continued shifting so North was at least marginally between him and Aster, and North kept stepping to clear a path, and Aster kept advancing.

"This is like watching… I have no clue. Birds, maybe," Jack said.
"Did you just compare these three idiots to courting birds?" Tooth asked.

Ombric and North both stopped and turned to stare, mouths open in shock. Aster lunged, and knocked Ombric to the ground.

"Hah!" He hauled the time traveler up, and squeezed until Ombric wheezed. Then he let go. "Thanks for the assist, cobber," he said, moving over to Jack.

Who grinned up at him, eyes crinkled so much they nearly vanished. "Who says I was trying to help? C'mon, let's sit down out here, I don't have nearly enough chairs for everyone."

Aster rolled his eyes, and sprawled out beside the new flowerbed, currently nothing more than a wide strip of bare dirt. "What kinda host are you," he mocked, "not having enough chairs for everyone?"

"Your home too," Jack pointed out, flopping down on the grass. "So same goes."

"You live here?" Katherine asked, looking charmed by the thought. "When did that happen?"

Aster shrugged. "Well, the tin lid was how old?" he asked, looking over at Jack. "Jamie, I mean."

"About ten when you moved in. He's climbing the hill to… God. Forty?" Jack looked stunned, and turned to North. "Has it really been thirty years?"

"It has." North took his coat off, and draped it over the grass like a blanket. He settled down, and beamed when Tooth sat down next to him, curled up like a dainty little thing on the coat. "Did you lose track of time?"

Thirty years? It hadn't felt that long… and yet, when he cast his mind back and counted the Easters… huh. Was that right? Weren't people supposed to argue at some point, get on each other's nerves? He could count on one hand the number of disagreements he'd had with Jack, after moving in, and he was pretty sure the only one that really counted was his retreating after General Winter's party. Anything else hadn't been an argument, and barely counted as a disagreement…

He shook his head, and watched everyone settle down. Sandy floated near Ombric, and Katherine and Nightlight held hands, somehow managing to cuddle with almost a foot of space between their bodies. Jack caught his eye and grinned, before looking at North with a mostly-serious expression.

"So, do we wanna sum up for the three people I've barely met, or…?" Jack suggested, waggling his eyebrows at Katherine. She giggled at him, and got a frown from Nightlight. Aster couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the pair, specifically Nightlight; Jack was just being friendly.

Well, it'd been some time since he'd last heard them dealing with modern humans, probably Jack's manners just seemed a bit strange to them.

"Who wishes to do the summing then?" North asked, looking a bit like a lazy, content bear, dangerous but disinclined to move. Tooth looked a little like the one holding the bear's leash, but mostly she just looked smug, the way she was leaning against North like that.

Aster nearly rolled his eyes. Cuddling was all well and good, but did they have to smirk like that?

"I'll do it," he said, and huffed when North took the opportunity to fall back into the grass, looking ready to take a nap. Jack held up a snowball, and tilted his head to the side. Aster shook his head, and then glanced up at the sun. Jack nodded, and set the snowball aside. For now.
Katherine was looking between the two of them, dawning comprehension in her eyes. "You two are together?"

Jack frowned. "Uh, I guess?"

"We live together." Aster huffed again, and looked over at Ombric, who was not being the sane one like he was supposed to. Instead he was staring at Aster like he'd grown a second head, or possibly four extra arms. "Alright, to sum up."

"That might be a good idea." Ombric shifted his attention to Jack, and squinted. Jack, predictably, crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue.

"Right, thank you, very helpful you brat," Aster grumbled. Jack beamed at him. "So. Jack was attacked by a fearling several months ago, and they were tracked to the Congo. They're... there. No people, they're not bothering the animals, they're just... trying to eat fruit and making nests out of leaves and branches."

"The fearlings are," Nightlight said, and shook his head. "Has Pitch been seen?"


Katherine looked over at the others first, who looked just as confused, and then at Aster. "Does that make sense to you?"

Aster sighed, and rubbed his forehead. "Perfectly. Jack's first Christmas as a Guardian, he decided to give Pitch a prezzie."

"You could always say I gave Marzie the present," Jack pointed out.

"You, don't talk." Aster jabbed a finger in Jack's direction, and then looked up, glancing between Katherine and Nightlight on one side, and Ombric, Sandy, Tooth and North on the other. "Jack dropped some firecrackers and a note down into Pitch's lair. Marzanna, a Slavic spirit of winter, darkness, and nightmares. Apparently she wanted a date?"

"Marzie likes her some men," he said. "Not even just for sex. Pitch has been pretty quiet since."

Ombric hummed, staring upwards. "Is it possible Pitch has been damaged, and the fearlings are acting independently?"

Aster's heart leapt in his chest, even as it tried to sink. That one fearling had attacked Jack. But now they were all acting... Of course, that had been without people around, who knew what would happen if potential prey showed up.

"Yeah, about that," Jack said, sobering up. "Bunny and I went and visited Mother Nature." He ignored the surprised looks from three of their guests, and Sandy's demand for the state of Mother Nature's health. Tooth and North looked ready to take a nap. "She's been doing some poking around at the fearlings, even before they started acting weird."

He took a deep breath, and caught Aster's eye. "She says they're transformed Pooka." Aster swallowed, and closed his eyes. "She's got genetic codes that say so."
Look, it's a few missing Guardians, here at last! Bunny's freaking them out, JUST a little... Tiny bit, really.
Jack waited for the hullabaloo to calm down. He didn't pay too much attention to it; the three newbies - and that was the wrong term for them, they'd been Guardians longer than him, but still - were mostly just babbling from the shock, while three of his friends looked grim, but unsurprised. Sandy was flashing what might've been swearwords at Ombric, or a swear-laden summation, but Tooth and North were quiet.

After a bit, everyone calmed down enough not to talk over each other, and Jack cleared his throat. He was immediately the center of attention, several sets of angry eyes pointed at him. He actually twitched, fingers and toes, against the sudden urge to hide.

"So," he said, and looked slowly from person to person. He smiled wryly at Bunny, who nodded back. "North thinks we need to grab a fearling, study the magic on them. Mother Nature said - well, implied - that it's a curse, and it can be broken."

Ombric stroked his stubble-covered chin, and hummed. "Reasonable," he said. "There is very little information on the fearlings, only on what information is useful for fighting them. But how will we keep hold of the fearling?"

Bunny looked over at Ombric, a pleased light in his eyes. "First we need a place," he said, ears tilting forward at the man. Jack drummed his fingers against his knee, thinking about it. Maybe the three newbies would have an idea, because he was out.

"Fearlings can move through shadows," Nightlight pointed out, which was something North had already passed along. "Is there some way we could fill a room with lights?"

"You'd have shadows behind the lights," Jack pointed out.

North straightened up. "Ah, but what if all surfaces glow? No lights to have shadows behind. Does not have to be very bright, just constant. And everywhere." He spread his hands, and the air between them seemed to shimmer and thicken. Jack leaned forward; this was magic, real magic, not just enchanted objects or weather manipulation.

A box made out of silver mist, faintly glowing, formed between North's hands. He tilted them, and the box tilted as well, the top fading away to show the inside, which glowed stronger. He dismissed the creation with a flick of his fingers, and wiped sweat off his forehead with one sleeve.

"Honestly," Ombric muttered. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, and passed it over. "You would think I raised you in a barn."

Jack was briefly confused, before North laughed and shook his head. "You didn't raise me at all, my friend, only taught me. So, what think you of my idea?"

Katherine and Nightlight turned and began muttering to each other. Jack left them to it, and got up long enough to walk over to Bunny's side.

"How're you holding up?" he asked, leaning into the Pooka. Bunny leaned back, looking pleased.

"She's apples, mate. We got some of the best magicians and minds, not necessarily all in one…"
Bunny smirked and tilted his head towards North. Jack rolled his eyes. Bunny's smile faded, and he nuzzled at Jack's hair. "I'm trying not to think of all the ways this can go wrong," he admitted, voice hushed. "It's... hard."

No kidding. As important as it was to Jack - they were talking Bunny's people, even if only a few scattered, possible survivors - it had to be thousands of times more important to Bunny. Being the last Pooka had utterly destroyed him, and had probably contributed more than a little to his living wild for who-knew-how long, a punishment for something that only a grief-addled mind would consider a crime.

Of course, it was hard not to doubt. There were so many things that could go wrong. The fearling curse could break, and kill the Pooka. Or it could break, and the Pooka could have been completely insane or something. Or it could be something else entirely.

Jack was resolved not to talk to Bunny about these doubts, unless Bunny brought them up first. And Jack would do his best to point out all the ways they were likely to succeed, since someone would have to.

Nightlight waved one hand, rather like Sandy trying to get peoples' attentions. "I can handle the light source," he said, mouth twisting into something that was almost, but not quite, a smile. "Do we bait a trap? Or do our best to hunt a fearling down and catch it in a net?"

Jack snorted and pressed harder against Bunny's side as he was, once again, the focus of everyone's attention. "They're not hunting people down. The net would probably be easier."

"They should be hungry by now," Katherine mused. "Or what passes for it with them. We can always try the net first. I haven't heard of fearlings planning, or setting up traps. It probably wouldn't occur to anyone about the possibility."

Sandy showed a fearling, the golden sand making the monster look almost cute. Jack shivered anyways. The fearling was touched by a tendril of dreamsand, and 'fell over' with little z's floating overhead.

"Do fearlings sleep?" Ombric asked. Sandy shrugged, and his signs must have translated to something like 'who knows', since everyone else nodded and shrugged in return.

"So!" North clapped his hands, and looked down at Tooth. She smiled up at him, and went back to her snuggling. Jack was reminded, a little bit, of a happy tigress, smug and sated and dangerous if roused. North, in contrast, was big and enthusiastic, like an excited Great Dane.

"So?" he asked.

"Since no plan survives first contact with enemy, or in this case target, let us move on to other things. Need to make the cage to hold the fearling, after all, will take some time. Perhaps a week?" he asked, peering at Nightlight, who nodded. North nodded back, and eyed Bunny. "Then we can go hunting. But must ask. When we cure fearlings, will there be another Pooka living with you two?" he asked, eyes twinkling. "Little bunnies?"

Bunny stiffened against Jack, and his ears twisted like he was fighting against flattening them. Jack shifted, one hand pressing against the small of Bunny's back, and grinned at North.

"I already offered to expand my domain," he said, gesturing vaguely at their surroundings. "Who knows? Maybe we'll end up with a village."

North opened his mouth, but Bunny cut him off. "It'd be nice to be an uncle," he said, and shrugged.
"Guess we'll have to see."

An uncle? Jack frowned up at Bunny, who clearly saw it and was just as clearly ignoring it. No kids of his own?

He tabled his questions, and turned his attention back on his guests, but a part of him was suddenly hyper-aware of Bunny, every shift, every minute change in his expression.

The meeting quickly turned into a catch-up session, and Jack was happy enough to take the opportunity to ask questions of his new companions. Nightlight had been the Man in the Moon's guardian, once upon a time, and Jack was careful not to show how ambivalent he felt towards the Moon. He doubted it'd go over well. Nightlight had also spent almost a thousand years, sealed away in an enchanted sleep, with Pitch Black. Nightmares, every night and every day. It'd apparently taken almost as long to regain the ability to speak, after that trauma.

Katherine was Mother Goose, and younger than Jack would've thought. She kept staring at him, particularly whenever he volunteered personal details. He'd have worried, except her fondest looks were directed at Nightlight, and she got the same intent expression whenever one of the others mentioned something she'd missed, while away.

Ombric was a time traveler. He spent more time talking with Sandy than anything else, though he seemed determined to tease North as much, if not more, than Bunny did. He barely talked to Jack at all.

They left, after a few hours, and an agreement on when to next meet up. Jack saw them out the proper gate, and then went back to find Bunny.

The Pooka was staring at the raw strip of earth, ears flat against his skull. The first golden rays of the setting sun turned his blue-gray fur to something warmer, closer to tan, and highlighted his simple shirt and shorts in what looked like molten gold.

"Hey," he said, and smiled when Bunny looked up at him. "Hungry?"

Bunny sighed, and swept one hand over his forehead and down his ears. "I suppose."

Something light, Jack decided. "C'mon, then, you can keep me company while I cook."

He waited, but Bunny didn't say anything about whatever it was making his eyes go dark in thought, or his shoulders slump. They ate, they cleaned the scant dishes, and settled down beside the fire for a few hours of reading, Jack talking and Bunny listening. They got ready for bed, and curled up together, Jack's nose pressed into the soft fur along the back of Bunny's neck.

Enough waiting. If he didn't ask now, he'd probably never.

"Cottontail?"

Bunny twitched, and curled up a little tighter. "Yeah?"

"Earlier… do you not want kids?" Some people didn't, after all. And there were some people who shouldn't, who just didn't… who were missing something, the ability to put someone else, their own child, first. It was fine not to want kids, but he'd have thought Bunny would.

"I…" Bunny sighed, and covered Jack's hand, draped along his stomach. "It's not a question of want," he said, sounding resigned. "It's biology."
"Yeah, okay, you lost me."

Bunny uncurled, pressing back against him. "Pooka have… had… have…"

"Have," Jack said. "Present tense."

"Right." He heard, and felt, Bunny sigh. "Pooka have three… three genders. And none. It, uh, shapeshifting…"

Fortunately Jack did know shapeshifters, so he didn't have to leave Bunny to flounder. "No such thing as gender dysphoria, you've got whatever parts you want whenever you want them?"

Bunny huffed, the sound almost like a laugh, and nodded. "Yeah. Some had it easier getting pregnant, some had it easier doing the part that got their partner pregnant… but there was none of this binary nonsense humans have. But then there were Pooka who were sayach. Like me."

Jack waited, but when Bunny didn't continue, he had to ask. "Is it… you can't do that shapeshifting part, or…?"

"I can. Never really bothered, since…" He curled up again, and trembled faintly. "Sayach can't. Fertility's… low. Nothing wrong with the plumbing, there's just… nothing. For my body to make babies with. I could carry a child," he added, sounding almost defensive. "But…" Even lying down, apparently it was possible to slump. "It wouldn't be mine."

Jack nuzzled the back of Bunny's neck, and sighed. "I'm sorry, Cottontail. That's a kinda sucky thing to have taken away."

Bunny shifted, and rolled over. He draped his arm over Jack's waist, and in a mirror of Jack's posture, pressed his nose into Jack's hair. "I never had it," he murmured, starting to sound sleepy. "And there's adoption, or implanting. North's question just bothered me, is all."

Jack nodded, and closed his eyes. "Well, if you do…"

"No."

No? He raised one eyebrow, but kept his eyes closed. "What, you'd move out?" He… hoped not. His arm might've tightened around Bunny's waist at the thought.

"No, I'm not moving out. And…" Bunny's breath was warm against Jack's scalp, shifting the hair with the force of his sigh. "And we, we're good, right? I don't need anyone else for… for this." He pulled Jack closer, and then relaxed. "Am I making sense?"

The winter spirit nodded, and hummed thoughtfully. "I do, yeah. Well, if you change your mind, we'll deal with that then. But we're good, Cottontail. If you want to stay good, you should probably go to sleep, though."

"Yeah," Bunny said, nuzzling Jack's hair again. "Good dreams, Frostbite."

"Sleep well, Fluffy."

Santoff Clausen rarely allowed outsiders to visit, these days. The blissful, halcyon days of the past were, alas, over and done. As humans moved further and further away from magic and faith, into the religion of science and fact, they became more and more hostile to what Santoff Clausen was. It was regrettable, but Ombric had seen it before, many times, and had faith that one day outsiders would
once more welcome magic. Perhaps in pairing it with science, perhaps a violent rejection of science… he had seen both happen, before, both in his timeline and others.

Time travel could be very confusing. Bunnymund had been one of the only people who related, but Bunnymund had destroyed the devices that enabled his travel, and even when he'd used them frequently he had still been limited.

Ombric was not; for Bunnymund, time travel had been like flicking through a book and coming to a stop on a particular page. For Ombric, it was less like flicking through a single book, and more like searching through a catalogue full of thousands of books, each one almost identical, and then deciding which page it was he wanted to stop and read. He thought the humans these days used the term 'alternate dimensions', and he doubted Bunnymund knew about them.

They didn't talk much about time travel anymore. But then, Bunnymund had, for quite some time, stopped talking about nearly everything.

Ombric paused in his notetaking, and brushed the feathered end of his quill over his lips. The closer the alternate dimension to his own, the harder it was for him to visit, until it became absolutely impossible. Perhaps because of all those other versions of himself, taking up the space he would otherwise slide into. At any rate, those few times he'd managed to slip into an alternate dimension - each one more nightmarish than the last, at least in his opinion, since in order to reach those dimensions his corresponding 'self' had to be dead - Bunnymund had never been highly social.

Interestingly, those dimensions with a Jack Frost tended to have a happier Bunnymund. It could very well have been a coincidence, and out of billions of ever-so-slightly-different dimensions Ombric could only reach three or four at any time, but he had been unsurprised by Nicholas' allegations of a relationship between this Bunnymund and Jack Frost.

A knowing expression and lack of surprise had led many people to think Ombric to be omniscient, before. Nicholas had never before fallen into that trap, but this one time seemed to be enough to rattle him. Bunnymund, in a relationship? And yet Ombric had seen it before: a Bunnymund who went by female pronouns and her lover, Jack; a Bunnymund that had been blind and feral, and courted and taught by Jack until he was once more a person, and not an animal. He had met a Bunnymund who'd had a Jack Frost, and lost him, and cherished their only child. He had met a Bunnymund who had known Jack, and lost him before anything could begin, still in mourning centuries later.

Why, then, would this be such a surprise?

Though he supposed to those who had only met one version of their friend, it would be a surprise. After all, Bunnymund was prickly, judgemental, didn't share very well and seemed to think his eyebrows were better for communication than his words. Jack Frost, every incarnation he'd ever met, never stopped talking, preferred pranks as vengeance to an argument, rarely held grudges… and yet. Equal and opposite, was that not what the romantics gushed over?

It didn't much matter why, when the result had always been positive, from what Ombric had seen. His musing came to an end with a quiet chime from the enchanted mirror. He set his quill aside, and gestured to the mirror; the image that formed was expected and welcome. Bunnymund and Jack Frost were early and alone, but Jack had never seen Santoff Clausen before, and was no doubt eager to look around.

Ombric moved at an appropriate speed to the front door of his tower, and composed himself before swinging the door open. "Good… ah," he said, staring at Jack. Was it normal for him to perch on his staff like that? He'd never seen that before…
Bunnymund gave him a look that was, presumably, supposed to speak volumes. Then he nudged Jack in the side. "There'll be time for sightseeing later," he said, his expression turning indulgent. "C'mon, we've got work."

Jack twisted and peered back over his shoulder in Ombric. "So are the people here spirits?" he asked. "Because they don't seem to be spirits. But they saw me, even the adults."

Ombric dodged a flailing hand, and withheld a sigh. Couldn't Bunnymund have explained anything before they arrived? Well, perhaps that was expecting a bit too much from the one with communicative eyebrows…

"The people here are, for the most part, mortal," he said, and gestured them in. "But they all have at least a spark of magic, and so have no difficulty in seeing spirits. For one reason or another, they have come to Santoff Clausen when the world outside became hostile to them or to the side effects of their powers."

"Poltergeists?" Jack asked.

"On occasion," Ombric allowed. Though not of late; in this century, it was more acceptable for a young man to masturbate. In earlier times, poltergeist activity was probably more socially acceptable.

"So," Jack said, bounding forward and then bouncing along beside Ombric. He was almost skipping. "You and Bunny've known each other for a long time, right? Do you have any embarrassing stories about him?"

Ombric didn't pause, though he wanted to. He did eye Jack sidelong. Was he somehow unaware that Bunnymund was walking behind them?

"I already told you, Frostbite," Bunnymund drawled, sounding far too amused at the situation. "Only embarrassment was on Ombric's side."

Jack grinned, and spun to walk backwards. "You're a liar, I bet there's something, some suppressed memory. Well?" he asked, spinning again and staring at Ombric.

He was getting a headache. Fortunately, they were at his study now, and he waved them in. Perhaps that would help. "Nothing comes immediately to mind," he said, moving to sit behind his desk. Bunnymund took a chair and a book, and seemed determined to, if not ignore them, at least make a show of it. Jack, on the other hand, looked around the room. It was a wonder Tooth hadn't made him a focus for her attentions, with his smile. His teeth were very white.

"I expect stories later," Jack said, and hopped back up onto his staff. "So, you're a time traveler, right?"

Ombric mentally braced himself, letting no part of his apprehension or dismay show. "I am. I believe the current title is Father Time, which is not, in fact -"

"So can you go forward and see what we should do and how it'll work out?"

He blinked. That was not the question he'd been expecting, to be honest.

He glanced at Bunnymund, who was smirking down at his book. Then he looked back at Jack, who stared at him, all traces of jovial attitude set aside for something rather more serious.

"You are not the first person to ask me that," he said, and leaned back in his chair. An explanation of his time travelling abilities, what joy. Perhaps he should write a book, or at least a pamphlet. Anytime
someone asked, he could give them one to read. "However, my abilities don't work that way."

"Why not?" Jack asked, not as if he was upset by the answer, simply confused. Apparently his eyebrows were as expressive as Bunnymund's, as they wiggled about over his eyes and finally came to a furrowed v over his nose. "Bunny already told me about you trying to go back and save the real Atlantis, what makes it so different?"

The real Atlantis. Ombric didn't sigh, but he wanted to. He couldn't have saved Pavlopetri, at least not the buildings and the farmland. But he had wanted to save the people. But Bunnymund had been right, in the end, as hard as it was to accept. He supposed it would have been worse if he'd grown up there, or if he'd had family in Pavlopetri, but he'd moved there after his kin had died.

"Are you familiar with the concept of paradox?" he asked, instead of directly answering.

"Sure," Jack said. "It's a statement that's self-contradicting, like 'wise fool' or 'be cruel to be kind', but that doesn't mean it's a false statement."

"Self-contradiction," Ombric agreed. "All inhabitants of Pavlopetri perished in the earthquake, but some survivors have been discovered living in the next city over." He paused, and inclined his head to Jack.

"Oh. You can't change history."

"Precisely." Well, not exactly precisely - there was a framework he could work within. He had actually done that several times for rescuing persecuted mages. After all, as long as there wasn't a body… many people were presumed dead, and went on to have happy, healthy lives. "And therein the difficulty with going forward. Would I change matters? If I said this one method will work, and the others will not, won't that interfere with what has already been?"

Jack looked thoughtful, but thankfully not confused. "It's under the same umbrella of 'can't change history', isn't it?" he asked. "Because even if we were to come to that final conclusion on our own, there'd be tests, which we'd skip if you went forward, saw what worked, and told us. And maybe it wouldn't work without those previous tests."

"Well, and there is the question of free will," Ombric said, feeling a touch nettled and no idea why. It was a valid summation of the situation, after all. There was no need to be annoyed.

Even if Jack was skipping over quite a bit of nonsense and dross most people dwelled on.

He shot a narrow look at Bunnymund, suspecting… something. Perhaps this was a prepared conversation, Jack provided with talking notes? But no, as amused as Bunnymund looked, he also looked pleasantly surprised, for all that his attention seemed directed down at his chosen book.

Jack hummed, and drummed his fingers on one knee. "So, you can't go back and change what happened…" He looked up at the ceiling, clearly thinking. "What about… things where there's no proof? Like… like books that were burned or paintings that vanished, stuff like that?"

"Going back and retrieving them?" Ombric tented his fingers before him, and shrugged with a nonchalance he didn't quite feel. Jack was prodding at a question he wrestled with daily, sometimes hourly.

He would bend the rules for people. People, after all, felt. They had lives. Said lives could be cut tragically short. He was a Guardian, and if he could not save everyone, than he would do his best to save those he could. Books, artwork… their loss was sad, but not quite so sad as a child, a young adult, someone's kith or kin being cut down.
Who could say what, precisely, would cause a change to the past or the future? If he brought this book or that forward into the future, setting it somewhere it could be found with no suspicion… what changes to the future would be wrought? Oh, on occasion he did, but only if he had determined, through scrying and the odd trip through time and place, that his actions would not change what was and would be.

"In general, the benefits do not outweigh the drawbacks," Ombric drawled. "In addition, in order to secure the items, I would have to take them just before the moment of destruction. Usually said moment happens during a fire, volcanic eruption, hoard of barbarians…"

Jack grinned, and shrugged. "Well, I had to ask," he said.

"He was gonna blame you for all those missing left socks," Bunnymund added, and turned the page. Left socks…? No. He did not want to know.

"Okay," Jack said, and sobered somewhat. "Big question. Since you can travel through time, since taking people forward would work… How come you haven't done anything about the Pooka? I bet there's a lot of them where there… weren't any bodies."

Ombric tensed, and glanced over at Bunnymund. The Pooka, for his part, looked pained but unsurprised. He turned his attention back to the winter spirit, and sighed.

"I cannot," he admitted. "Though I have thought about it." Bunnymund was his friend, after all. And his friend's grief had been a great and terrible thing, though it had gentled, of late. "I can only go so far back before my birth, and I cannot leave the planet at all."

"Ah." Jack shrugged, as if his shoulders hadn't fell half a second before. "Okay. So, ideas for wall materials to hold fearlings with, yes, no?"

Ombric sighed. Nicholas might have, still, been shocked at Bunnymund's relationship with Jack Frost. Ombric was not. Else Bunnymund might have killed Jack for the headaches, by now…

Chapter End Notes

So a bunch of stuff happens in this chapter! Including me revisiting and finally explaining what Sayach is - I think I last mentioned in in chapter three or four? (TL:DR, Sayach is born-sterile, or with such low fertility the end result is the same, no babies from that Pooka's swimmers or eggies.) Ombric's POV and why he can't mess with time travel, and why everyone has to fumble through things. Ect, ect.

Next weekend I'm going to a convention, Ad Astra (for sci fi and fantasy writers, what fun!) but I'll still be able to post the chapter on Sunday as normal. It's going to be a very... special chapter and I'm already cackling in anticipation.
Jack was staying far, far away from the fearling capture.

He'd have gone to the moon, if it'd been an option. And considering he was still tempted, off and on, to punch the Man in the Moon in the face, well… And that was discounting how visiting the moon would probably kill him. Even if there was some kind of eco-dome thing with breathable air, Jack was tied to the earth and the seasons and it wasn't like he was looking for reasons to get himself on the bottom of the 'visit the moon' list or anything, just…

He was just kind of looking for reasons to get himself put at the bottom of a list that didn't exist yet.

Jack glared down at his knitting. The others were working hard out in the Congo. Jack had… not wanted to go with them, exactly, but he certainly hadn't wanted to stay behind. But once he'd stepped out through the portal into the muggy heat - seen the trap - thought about chasing the fearlings into it -

Well. Panic attack. Should've been expected.

Bunny had escorted him home, and then waffled between returning to the Congo, and staying with Jack. He'd gone, after Jack had insisted at the top of his lungs, but he hadn't looked overly happy about it. Still, those were his people, transformed, cursed… he should be there.

Jack would keep the home fires burning. Literally. He had a pie in the oven and a fire going in the fireplace.

He hadn't done much knitting. Just two rows, after almost two hours of waiting. It was frustrating, but -

He couldn't have explained what it felt like, to have his domain invaded. It was sight and smell and touch and taste and so many different things, all mixed together in a disgusting mess. Jack tossed his knitting aside and raced for the door, staff appearing in his hand as if he'd magicked it there.

In some small, sane corner of his mind, he bemoaned the shattered door. That was going to be a pain to fix…

The rest of him was awash in a red rage, ready to tear and freeze the one who dared invade his home…

He slowed, and growled. The invader had made no attempt at hiding. Stood out in the middle of the field, smiling.

"Hello, Jack," Pitch said, looking much too smug. "Or should I say, my new fearling prince?"

Chapter End Notes

So, if you've been on my tumblr (kayasurin, exactly as on here) then you know I've
been at Ad Astra for the weekend. (If you haven't, then long story short I was at a convention and my mom snores so badly I couldn't sleep. Pretty much at all.) I'm very tired, thank god this was pre-written and pre-planned to be this short.
"Hah!" North said, grinning. "This is the picture of success!"

Aster wasn't so sure. Yes, they had a fearling - they had all the fearlings - and they seemed to be contained, but the fearlings were very angry and they didn't have a solution yet.

He leaned on the viewing wall, and frowned at the creatures within. They all had a certain similarity of features, quadrupeds with four tentacles sprouting from their backs, four sets of horns, two upright and two curling around the sides of their heads. Apart from that, they were all different.

One fearling was patterned with black and yellow stripes, which might have been striking except for how that shade of yellow made everyone feel nauseous looking at it. Another had long, shaggy fur, hiding the exact shape of its body, somehow worse for the lack of details. A third was covered in scales like an alligator, along with an elongated muzzle full of sharp teeth.

There were other differences, some more extreme than others, but no matter which fearling he looked at, it was hard to believe they had ever been Pooka.

Perhaps that was the point.

Tooth rested one slender hand between his shoulder blades, pushing against him just enough to be comforting instead of ticklish. "We'll figure it out," she said. "You'll see. And Pitch can't reach them here, either."

There was that. He straightened up, and turned to smile at Tooth. North, in the background, was planning a party. It sounded… loud. "You're right," he said. "Thanks. Now, you might want to catch the goober before the brass band gets added in."

"Brass…?" Tooth turned, listened to North's plotting, and then darted off to bring sanity and taste to the party planning.

Aster smiled, though the smile faded as he went back to watching the fearlings.

He couldn't have said when he got company, and if it'd been anyone but Nightlight he'd have been annoyed. He was trying to do better, after all; working hard and getting back to his old, warrior abilities. Nightlight, though, was sneaky enough to pluck hair from a Capo master's tail. Only way to hear him coming was if Katherine had woven bells into his hair again.

Aster raised one eyebrow in inquiry. Nightlight, watching the fearlings, didn't seem to notice, but he spoke anyways.

"You've changed."

"How so?" Aster inquired. He had, of course, but what exactly would Nightlight focus in on?

The Lunar man eyed him sidelong, and then shrugged. "You're happier. Before, duty drove you. Now, there is joy in the duty. And your dress sense is much improved."

Dress sense! "Oy!" He grabbed for Nightlight, but the young man ducked out of the way, smirking.
"I'll have you know my robes are the height of fashion for - get back here, you brat! Pooka kits dreamed of wearing the Brotherhood robes! You wear pajamas!"

Nightlight's laughter didn't ring out, but it was warm and happy and that was what mattered.

The fearlings shied away from the laughter, crowding against the back of the cage.

Aster wasn't alone in staring. The fearlings regarded them with apparent wariness, before spreading out as much as they could, their anger at the close quarters apparently given over to caution.

"They flinched from laughter?" Nightlight murmured, before looking towards North. "I have research to do."

"So do I," North agreed, and stroked his beard. "Lizbet! Keep watch over fearlings!" he called, gesturing to one of the many yeti. "We will be in library. Will you join us?" he asked, turning to Aster.

He hesitated, and then finally shook his head in the negative. "Gonna check in on Jack," he said, and folded his arms. The panic attack had been mild, compared to what Jack had gone through before his Spirit Guides got involved. Still, he didn't like the thought of Jack waiting at home, or going to bed alone. "We'll probably check in tomorrow."

"Hm, tomorrow I have date with Naughty and Nice lists," North said. "Extra eyes will therefore be helpful for research."

Tooth gestured at Aster, and pointed towards the kitchen. "Take some of that gingerbread I smell. And remind Jack to brush his teeth!"

The gingerbread was probably a good idea. They could have it with dinner. Aster thanked the yeti who provided him with a basket, a stack of gingerbread covered with a handkerchief. There wasn't much else to do after that but open a tunnel and head for home.

The changes to the tunnel was even more vibrant than before; there were so many beams of sunlight that there might have been a lattice-work overhead instead of solid earth. Flowering vines climbed over the walls, anywhere there wasn't a patch of moss or cluster of hyacinth and snowdrops. Grass covered the floor, mint-green flowers just visible against the barely-darker stalks. The air was warm, with just a hint of a nip in the odd patch of shadows, and everything smelt of flowers and warm earth.

The fearlings had all been captured and North and Nightlight were collaborating over their magic books. It'd been a mild winter so far, and he had a basket of gingerbread fresh from the oven. The tunnel was full of light.

It was hard to imagine anything going wrong.

So it was like a punch to the gut, to leap out of the tunnel and into a wrecked gazebo.

Aster wheezed, and staggered against the lone, remaining post. It was splintered halfway up its length. The rest of the posts were fallen on the ground, cracked and in places burned.

The surrounding gardens were… He flinched from the destruction, and stepped forwards, away from the wreck that had been his gazebo, but things weren't any better further in.

Everything was so still. There should have been noise, things crashing, Jack yelling, the wind howling, but - nothing.
Nothing.

What - what had happened? The lawn - he had to swallow a moan at the sight of the lawn, holes gouged out of the earth and spikes of ice stabbing at the sky. Trees, their Christmas tree, lay on the ground, bare roots clawing at the air. The house…

The house was missing the roof. And several walls.

Aster had to stop and hug himself, so cold. He was shaking, teeth chattering. This - his home, not again -

Where was Jack?

The shivering got worse. Jack… If something had happened to him…!

"Jack?" Aster swirled his ears, listening for a noise, a breath of sound.

Nothing.

"Jack!"

Nothing.

Jack could be dead, or dying. Crushed under the collapsed fireplace. Stabbed through by those arm-length splinters of wood. A broken, blood-soaked doll left helpless on the ground -

He spun before he'd even registered the faint noise, fingers crooked into claws and teeth abruptly sharp enough to draw blood. The cuts on his tongue and inside of his cheeks stung, but he didn't care.

The wind stared at him through mismatched eyes, and then snorted. It sounded disgusted.

"Where's Jack?"

The wind didn't roll its eyes, though it did give that impression. It turned and began walking towards the cabin, limping a little on one hind leg. Aster followed, absently wondering just how the wind, in a constructed body, could be limping.

They rounded the cabin, and then Aster caught sight of Jack, sitting on the ground and so invisible from the front of the wreck. He yelled, and ran forwards, leaving the wind behind.

Jack watched him approach, eyes hazy and not focusing right. Blood crusted the left side of his face, and his right cheekbone was black and blue with blood clotted under the skin. His clothes were ripped, both hands had started to swell, and blood - the wrong shade to be his - coated his feet in a sticky, drying mess.

Beautiful, Aster thought, and threw himself down beside Jack. "Where're you hurt?" he demanded, reaching for Jack's head as he spoke.

For some reason, the question made Jack convulse with laughter. "'m not hurt," he slurred, batting at Aster's hands. "'m drunk!"

What.

Aster stopped groping for Jack's head, and stared at him. "You're what?"
Jack tried to focus on Aster's face. The effort was distracting enough that he didn't seem to notice Aster finally getting his hands on Jack's head and feeling for lumps. "When - when assholes break inno your domain, you… I don't know what you do," Jack admitted, squinting up at him. "I, on this hand," he added, lifting a bottle of something that smelt of alcohol and raspberries, "get drunk. After I kick face."

"Face?" Aster asked.

Jack wiggled his blood-covered feet, and grinned. "Butts don't bleed so good."

Then he took a swig from the bottle, licked his lips, and laughed.

There were no suspicious lumps, no soft spots on the skull, and only the one cut; too small for stitches, and already scabbing over. Aster moved his hands down, poking and prodding as he checked for broken bones. Jack continued to drink, neither hindering Aster's work, nor helping him.

"Jack," Aster breathed, the tight knot in his stomach relaxing when he confirmed that Jack wasn't hiding broken bones, or bleeding horribly from some hole in his side. "What happened?"

Jack wiggled the bottle at Aster; the liquid inside sloshed and smelt more. "Wanna drink?"

"No, I want to know what happened."


Pitch. Pitch had come here, and - again, for the fourth time, he'd wrecked Aster's home. He should have known, expected this. Pitch wanted nothing more than to make Aster suffer, and this time Jack was suffering along with him.

"I'm sorry," he breathed, and hung his head.

Jack patted him between the ears with a clumsy hand. "You're dumb. That's dumb. You wanna, wanna know what's dumb?"

He laughed. Or possibly sobbed. "What?"

"I can ask for a drink in any language," Jack warbled, and flopped down on his back. "Fuck, now I gotta rebuild. 'Sephy's gonna kill me."

… Rebuild?

Aster straightened up, and looked around. Rebuild…

It wasn't as if the domain was gone, after all. The earth could be smoothed out, trees replanted or repurposed into planks and logs. It rained and snowed most of the time because Jack couldn't be bothered to keep the weather out, just as it didn't normally have snow inside the domain when outside didn't. It was why they weren't likely to have a white Christmas this year, despite Jack's grumbling; nearby Burgess was going through a bit of a warm, dry spell, and didn't have any snow either.

The cabin could be rebuilt. The gazebo could be rebuilt.

It just… hurt.

"Who's 'Sephy?" he asked, even as he began envisioning what the cabin would look like, updated
and more modern. Bigger windows, with screens to keep out the bees but let in the breeze...

"Gardener. Her plants died. Don't let're hubby talk to me, he likes trains."

That made about as much sense as Aster should have expected, from a drunk Jack. He sighed, and looked down at his friend. "How much've you drank?"

Jack frowned, and hummed. "Dunno. Lots. Gottalotta drinks. Less now." He went to take another drink, but lying down and sipping from bottles didn't mix. He spluttered as about half of the remaining liquid spilled out over his face.

"Think that's enough of that," Aster said, and pried the bottle out of Jack's hands. He tossed it aside, and scooped Jack up in his arms, sticky alcohol, sticky blood, and all. "C'mon. We're gonna have to bunk at North's."

"No," Jack whined. "Don' wanna. Can't make me."

Considering Aster was carrying him, the Pooka begged to differ. "Do you need to do anything to keep Pitch out?" he asked.

Jack, for some reason, giggled. And then laughed outright. "I won. So no. Very no." He giggled the rest of the way to the ruins of the gazebo, and the tunnel entrance.

Aster paused, and swallowed down a lump in his throat. "Why didn't Pitch use the tunnel?" he asked, himself mostly. Jack was obviously no good for answers.

And yet, Jack answered. "Traps," he said, and pointed at several ice spikes. "Go boom. Put some tooths in the mouth," he added, and yawned. "North's?"

"Yeah. Get some shut eye, if you can."

Once in the tunnel, Jack's head pillowed on his shoulder, Aster reached into the tunnel magic and focused. It was harder to collapse the permanent opening than he'd expected; Jack's magic had woven through and around his own, like protective thorns on a rose vine.

Traps. Right.

Aster shook his head, and held Jack a little tighter. North's.

Chapter End Notes

Oh goodness gracious me, Jack is drunk! At least he's not a fearling prince.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Warnings: mention of historical prejudice against homosexuals, though nothing present-time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katherine hadn't honestly known what to expect, when Nicholai told her that Aster was in a relationship. The seventeen-hundreds had hardly been what anyone would call 'progressive', at least in the area she had grown up in. Hapsburg still had the death penalty then, and while in retrospect she knew that the whispers had been malicious and not at all honest… they had still formed her opinions.

She had resolved not to treat Aster any differently from before, and to treat Jack just like everyone else. Just because her opinions had been formed by those prejudices, did not mean she had to be ruled by them!

Even so, it had been difficult not to look for signs of perversion in Aster, or fairy weakness in Jack. It was rare that she was so thankful to have her secret expectations dashed.

Aster, far from acting perverted, was happier than she remembered. He was quick to smile, to sling an arm over the shoulder in a sideways hug, quicker to laugh than ever before. If he looked at Jack as if the frost spirit had hung the stars in the sky, well, many people in love tended to that exact expression. The two must have decided to keep any public displays to a minimum, for she saw very little contact between them, no more than between Aster and Nicholai in fact. Yet there was a tenderness between them that was not between Aster and anyone else, and Jack held most of Aster's attention no matter where he was in the room or what he was doing.

As for Jack… he was small, yes, and slight, but fierce. No one would ever expect him to dress in women's clothing! Well, not unless it was his idea, she supposed. He moved a bit like some of the brawlers she'd met, aware of his body and his surroundings, confident, but in Jack there was the addition of a dancer's grace. It was quite lovely to see, of course, but not very 'fairy-like'. And, of course, he'd picked up Nicholai that one planning session, with only one arm. Hardly weak.

She had almost begun to think Nicholai was wrong, that Aster and Jack were just good friends, but now…

Well, now she had no doubt. It was impossible to think of them as any but the closest of lovers. And she could find nothing disgusting, nothing improper or off-putting, in that thought or their actions.

Jack was face-down on the table, a cloth-wrapped handful of snow laid across the back of his head. Aster kept one hand on the back of Jack's neck, thumb occasionally sweeping up and down the side of Jack's neck. Katherine remembered her father doing such for her mother, during one of her mother's migraines. At the time, she had thought it one of the clearest signs of love she'd ever seen.

"Bunny, he's fine," Tooth snapped, keeping her voice down for Jack's sake. The poor soul was, apparently, hungover and not concussed. And, hungover, his head hurt. "Stop demanding medical checks and leave him be."
Aster glared at Tooth, but sat down beside Jack. "Pitch attacked him," he repeated. "In Jack's own domain!"

Jack mumbled something, and jabbed an elbow into Aster's side. The poor dear jumped and looked momentarily hurt, before wincing and lowering his voice. "We've gotta hunt Pitch down before he does something worse."

Tooth sighed, and shared a commiserating expression with Katherine. "Bunny, we don't even know what Pitch did."

"Bleed," Jack mumbled, and snickered. The snickers quickly turned to a quiet moan, which trailed off into near-audible levels of silent misery.

"You shouldn't have drank so much," Katherine pointed out.

Jack raised his head, somehow aware enough that he elbowed Aster in the side when the Pooka went to protest. "I know that now. Seemed like a good idea at the time…"

Aster repositioned the snow pack on Jack's head, glowering at the world in general. If Pitch was foolish enough to show up in this moment, Katherine thought, he would surely be rent limb from limb. A part of her regretted the thought - no one was beyond redemption, she truly believed that - and a part of her was almost interested in the idea. She didn't think Aster had ever had a no-holds-barred fight with Pitch before.

How fortunate, that Mother Nature agreed with Katherine, and wanted Pitch left alive! Else he would be dead and gone, long before anyone could save him from the darkness.

How fortunate, also, that her brother chose that moment to enter the room. Nicholai had never looked better in that moment. He and Aster could snap at each other, as they did, and so diffuse some of the horrible tension currently in the room.


"Pitch destroyed Jack's domain," Aster said, something horrible and tight in his voice.

"No," Jack grumbled, straightening up. "Just the cabin. Domain itself held fine. Kicked his ass, then got drunk."

Nicholai looked far to accepting of Jack's apparent trail of logic, at least for Katherine. Quite likely for Aster as well, for his upper lip kept twitching to reveal the tips of his incisors. Pooka, he had confided to her once, were teeth fighters, and perfectly comfortable biting their enemies as well as kicking, punching, and physically throwing them. She doubted those flashes of teeth were currently very friendly.

"What did Pitch want, though?" Nicholai asked. He sat down, at the end of the table, in the chair that everyone else found horrendously uncomfortable. "He never does things without plan."

Jack snorted, and then looked like he regretted the sound. "Said something about fearling prince," he said, and lowered his head back down onto the table. "Cut my hand up punching his mouth. Freaking shark teeth."

Katherine kept a careful eye on Aster. Of course she had quite a bit of concern over the revelation of Pitch's goal, but Aster looked like a volcano on the verge of exploding. Yet his paws were gentle as he rubbed Jack's neck and repositioned the snow pack, so he hadn't completely lost all control.
Katherine had only seen him do so once before. She was not eager, very much reluctant, to repeat the experience.

Nicholai stroked his beard, and then reached over to take Tooth's hand. "He must not have realized we got rid of the infection," Tooth mused. Katherine frowned. What infection? "You don't suppose he had his fearlings in the Congo to distract us from Jack, do you?"

Aster growled, but subsided when Jack grabbed his wrist.

Tooth waited until Aster had calmed, somewhat, before continuing. "I wish we knew what he was planning."

At that fortunate moment, the rest of the Guardians arrived, Sandy and Ombric, and her own, dear Nightlight. Nightlight smiled for her, as faint and fleeting as moonlight on rippling water. And just as lovely. He stood beside her, and under the table, they twined their fingers together.

Ombric and Sandy moved to the head of the table, sitting down and floating as per their individual natures. It occurred to Katherine that they were now four couples, in a manner of speaking; North and Tooth, Katherine and Nightlight, Jack and Aster, and then Ombric and Sandy. It was a pleasing form of symmetry, even down to two couples being male-female pairs, and two being same-gender. For a perfect reflection, she supposed one of those same-gender pairs should have been female, but she supposed it didn't much matter.

Besides, there were only two ladies among the Guardians right now. And dear as Tooth was, Katherine just could not find her attractive.

"So," Nicholai said, looking over at the three just joined. "Pitch attacked Jack's domain, expecting him to be fearling prince." Nightlight stiffened beside her; Aster looked enraged. Sandy and Ombric did not look surprised, and wasn't that most interesting? "Jack fought him off."

Ombric looked over at Jack, one eyebrow winging upwards in surprise. "Concussion?"

"Hangover," Aster corrected. "Jack decided best way to celebrate kicking Pitch's arse was lots of alcohol."

"We must figure out what Pitch is up to," Nicholai said. "This worries me. Was he planning to have fearling prince? Was the attack earlier part of his plan?"

Katherine was not the only one confused, she could see. That, as much as the way Aster was beginning to swell up like an enraged pineapple grenade about to go off, prompted her to speak up. "What attack?"

Aster paused, and deflated somewhat. "Right. You don't know."

Sandy waved one hand, and began flashing a moving picture as summary. Katherine beamed and paid close attention. Despite being played out in golden sand, the summary was chilling. Nightlight watched as closely as she; Aster quite deliberately looked away.

"It takes more than just a fearling infection to become a fearling prince," Nightlight observed. Only the tight grip he had on her fingers belied his disquiet; in all other ways he appeared nothing more than the calm, once-guard to the Lunanoff Prince. "It is difficult to say what Pitch does deliberately, or what he does to try and take advantage of a change in situation."

Jack lifted his head from the table, and held up one hand. Aster immediately closed his mouth. "Does it matter?" Jack asked. "He didn't get what he wanted. Unless he wanted a broken leg," he added,
looking thoughtful. "Because he did get that."

"You broke Pitch's leg?" Ombric asked. "He's a Celestial, his bones are harder than the human norm."

Katherine smiled a little at Jack's obvious confusion. It was cute, like a puppy trying to find the source of a strange noise. "How did you break his leg, Jack?"

"Uh, kicked it? The way you do?" Jack looked up at Aster. "It isn't that weird, is it?"

Aster stroked Jack's hair, and sighed. "Well, not for you, I imagine. Calf or thigh?"

"Knee?" Jack shrugged, and formed a snowball with a gesture. He pressed the snow against one temple. "Anyways, broken leg, Pitch got one. And I'm not infected. So unless his goal was said leg and bleeding a lot, he did not get what he wanted." He waved the hand not currently holding the snowball. "So let's worry a little less about what he's done and start thinking about what he might do, and also how to cure the fearlings."

Curing fearlings… Katherine nodded, and looked to Nicholai. "Have you studied the magic on them, yet?"

"Ah, yes," Nicholai said, his eyes lighting up with delight. "Most complex curse I have seen, ever! But we are all clever, we can fix things…"

Katherine settled back in her chair, Nightlight's grip on her fingers easing as he did. Her brother was right. They were clever, and they could fix things.

They could fix this.

It would make a wonderful story.

Jack palmed his squeeze-ball and, second the door was closed behind them, whipped it at Bunny's head as hard as he could.

Bunny knocked it away, with a knife because he was insane, and glared at him. "What was that for?"

"You know damn well, Mr. Fussy. So don't you dare."

Bunny had the affront to look confused and annoyed. "Don't dare what? You could've died, Jack. Or worse."

Yeah, worse. He didn't shiver at the thought, even though something had become very, very obvious during his fight with Pitch. He shoved the thought, the suspicion, aside for later. Winter things were not appropriate for this conversation.

"I handled it. And since I handled it, you're not going to run off and do something stupid." Like start sleeping in caves again. Jack was not going to let Bunny do that to himself.

Bad enough Pitch had trashed the cabin and the surrounding domain. Worse… hard as he'd tried, the little tree Bunny used for his parents' shrine was probably wrecked. Again.

He wasn't sure Bunny had realized that little fact yet.

Bunny narrowed his eyes, ears going flat against his head like an angry horse. "You callin' me
stupid, mate?" He spun the knife between his fingers, and then sheathed it on his belt. "'Cause I gotta say, don't really appreciate it."

"I'm not calling you stupid." Not that way, at least. "Rash, then."

"You're the bloody king of rash," Bunny snapped. "If I'm gonna go out and -"

Jack slammed his foot against the floor, and frost spread from the contact, fast as lightning. Within a breath, it covered the walls, floor, and ceiling. In two, the frost thickened over the door and windows, turning into a hard shell.

"No. No going out."

Bunny looked around, his eyes wide for all of three seconds, before glaring at Jack. "You can't lock me in."

Jack really missed his staff right now. It'd be something to strangle, at the very least. "Clearly, I can. And I will, as long as it takes to -"

"Jack you arse if you don't take this ice down right now -"

"- get it through your head -"

"- so help me, Frostbite, I'll -"

"- that you don't have to sleep -"

"- shake you so hard your teeth'll rattle out -"

"- in a cave, because that's just dumb -"

"- and Tooth will - wait, what?" Bunny stopped scowling, and straightened up. "What was that about a cave?"

Jack sucked in a breath, and held it. When that didn't help as much as he'd hoped for, he pinched the bridge of his nose. "I am not going to let you go all wild-man again just 'cause Pitch was an asshole. I - we, Cottontail, we - are going to rebuild the cabin, put some nasty traps along my domain for anyone trying to break in again, and you are going to stay with me and not in some cave being miserable!"

Bunny looked stunned, to the point that he moved over to the bed and dropped down until he was sitting on it. "That was... very vehement," he said.

"I mean it." Jack folded his arms, and did his best to glare. "I know it's like a kick in the teeth, but seriously. No wild-man act."

Bunny rubbed one hand over his muzzle, and sighed. He then proceeded to stare at Jack, frowning a bit, for what felt like forever but was probably no more than a minute or two.

Finally, the Pooka spoke. "I really want to smack you right now."

Jack's arms dropped to his sides. "What? Why?"

"You locked me in the room." Bunny shot Jack a look that was so unimpressed, it was practically condescending. Possibly pitying. Quite probably both. "Because you thought I might, what, go back to living in the wild like I'd done earlier?"
"Hardly an unfounded expectation," Jack countered. "I mean, look at your track record!"

Bunny muttered something under his breath; Jack heard nothing but what might've been the word 'yours', which made no sense. "You're such a bleeding seppo. I wasn't gonna run off to do anything, 'cept maybe tear Pitch's head off his shoulders and spit down the stump."

Oh. "Oh." Jack dismissed the ice with a wave of his hand, and when that didn't work began making greater and more active gestures, until he was flailing his arms. Only when he'd gotten to that point did the ice begin to melt. The yeti would probably kill him for the damage done to the wood.

"You thought I'd do a runner?" Bunny asked, back to unimpressed.

"Well, yeah? Pitch broke yet another home, and last time…" Jack shrugged. "Okay, so it was maybe a bit of a stretch, but you've been acting all fluttery and weird since."

"I was worried about you!" Bunny rubbed his hands over his muzzle again, and then reached up and grabbed a hold of his ears, tugging gently. It looked a bit like a human tugging on his own hair, though it was probably more painful. "How can any one person be so oblivious, I do not know…? I was worried about you. You were covered in blood, you were hurt, you were drunk, how was I supposed to react, huh?"

Jack dropped down on the bed beside Bunny. "Guess we probably should've talked before yelling and locking you in the room," he mused.

"You think you're funny, but you're really not." Still, Bunny slung an arm over Jack's shoulders, he couldn't have been too upset about it. "You really figured locking me up would work?"

"Why not?" Jack leaned into the contact. "It's worked so far."

He felt the Pooka stiffen. "What do you mean?"

"Uh, are you telling me you know how to get out of my domain, without one of your tunnels?"

"That's… not funny."

Jack snickered. "It kinda is, actually. Not that I meant to, just…" He shrugged, and went back to his leaning against Bunny. Probably technically snuggling, actually.

"Is that why everyone called me the new Persephone?" Bunny growled, and shook Jack by the shoulder. "How, then?"

Jack huffed. "Why do you want to know? You use your tunnels."

"Because I'm no Persephone!"

"Yeah, you bunk with me year 'round. And we're not married." Jack straightened up, because Bunny was being a fusspot, and sighed. "You go through the gate, you're out in the forest by Burgess."

Bunny stared at him. "That's it?"

"Yeah." He had a thought, and grinned. "And if you're going to be angry at anyone, be angry at North or Tooth or Sandy. I wanted you around, of course I wasn't going to tell you how to leave. They just chose not to tell you."

Bunny pulled him back against the Pooka's side. "So. Is it rash to go hunting Pitch with knives and malice aforethought?"
"Probably at least a little." Jack yawned, a little surprised at his sudden exhaustion. "Bed?"

"And then kill Pitch?" Bunny asked, with a mock-pathetic tone of voice. The wistful expression was probably not a put-on.

"Mother Nature will flip out if you kill Pitch. Bed."

Bunny huffed, but pulled off his belt and bracers, and then got into the bed. He made a face at the orthopedic mattress, which Jack couldn't really blame him for. Orthopedic mattresses were nothing compared to a well stuffed, wool-filled sack.

North didn't offer his guests nightgowns, and Jack certainly wasn't going to sleep in his clothes like some middle-ages peasant, so he just stripped down. Bunny raised one eyebrow, neither surprised nor disgusted, and held up one corner of the blanket so Jack could slide right in.

"Not gonna be too cold?"

"Winter spirit," Jack pointed out. He yawned. "Ugh, remind me to chat with Marzanna tomorrow, I have to ask her a few questions."

"What about?"

Bunny's fur was warm and soft, and if Jack wrapped his arms around the Pooka like a cuddly octopus, he could be pretty sure no one would be sneaking out of bed to murder a fear spirit. "Pitch's making holes in the world," he slurred, waving one hand vaguely at the lights. They went out. "Same kinda stuff winter deals with. Night, Bunny."

"Holes in the world?"

Jack mock-snored, but somewhere in there, it must have turned into the real thing.

Chapter End Notes

Have a bonus Katherine POV. (When I get stuck, I just swap POVS to someone not Jack or Bunny and ramble for a while, it works.) And look, the boys are talking!
Jack couldn't say he was overly pleased by his conversation with Marzanna, but at least it answered the questions he'd had. Even if it'd raised new ones.

He didn't tell anyone about what he and Marzanna had talked about, no matter how much Bunny asked. He had his reasons, and not just that it was a winter thing. Even though it was, very much so. Right down to Pitch being, technically, a winter spirit himself.

"There's a reason why the most predatory of spirits are also of winter," Marzanna had said, and sent him off with cookies and a bottle of wine from 1503. The cookies had been snickerdoodles, and very good.

Of course, there were things he'd discussed with Marzanna that he could share, with North - who, as another winter spirit, was always available if Jack needed to do a full disclosure with another Guardian. North had cackled like a mad thing at the tidbits, and dragged Ombric and Nightlight off for an expedition into the library, which at least cut down on the pestering by a factor of two.

Of course, it did leave Jack with the three Guardians who knew him best, and Katherine who was a sneaky little thing, but there was a reason the saying went 'every little bit helps'.

He had deflection available, so he used it. "Marzanna thinks Pitch took one hit to the head too many," and "I have learnt way, way too much about the sex they had, I don't want to think about it, thanks." It worked. He doubted it'd put Bunny off forever, and Katherine had the info-hungry look of the best journalists and historians, but at least he had some time to process things on his own first.

And in the meantime, North's researches into the curse on the fearlings progressed. Starting with confirmation that it was a curse, similar enough to the frog prince transformation to make him giddy at the realization, the Russian flying thick and fast as he babbled at Tooth. There'd also been gestures. It'd been pretty cute, out of arm-waving distance.

Jack, after North had assured him he'd have his part to play in the cure, but he didn't have to hang around for the researching part, had gone back to his domain to clean things up.

It'd been pretty dismissal, but there'd been a few good parts. The expression on Bunny's face when he'd walked into their room at North's, and seen the seedling for his parents' shrine… that'd been excellent.

But the rest of it… Jack had to enlist help from the usual suspects in order to move and replant all the fallen trees. Bunny had stayed away while the Native American spirits had been there, even though they'd all been in human form for the work. All Jack could figure was that Bunny got uncomfortable around spirits that flowed so easily between animal instinct and human thumbs.

Once the trees were replanted, Bunny went to work on smoothing the lawn back out and urging the plants back to something resembling good health. Jack had fixed the chicken coop and the bee boxes before turning to his cabin.

For every item he pulled out of the ruin, there were ten more that'd been smashed to bits. It was hard not to sulk about the damage, but he had his thoughts to distract him.
Nightmare. The source of Pitch's powers, the thing that had turned him into Pitch Black in the first place.

Nightmare. The thing winter spirits worked to contain, in all the old places, on the important days.

How many times, Jack wondered, had he gone off - winter solstice, summer, the equinoxes - only to wake up at some ancient site, some stone ring or old mound, exhausted and feeling a great big void beneath his feet?

Now that he knew… He found himself rubbing his arm whenever he thought about it. Nightmare, source of the fearlings. Trying to consume his planet, destroy his people.

And then he'd have to go and play with a blizzard or something, because the urge to hit something got a little too strong.

It worried Bunny, he could tell, but the deflections were still working, and besides. Bunny hadn't liked talking about the whole "Jack is actually just as violent as all the other winter spirits" thing. Anything that'd keep Bunny from fretting was a good thing; the Pooka was already upset enough over the wreck of the garden, he didn't need more stress.

He was nowhere near done cleaning up his cabin, when North sent a message advising he was ready to move onto the next step of curing the fearlings.

Aster stayed close enough to Jack that their arms brushed, ready to drag him out of there if need be. Jack was fully confident that he'd have no problems dealing with the fearlings, while Aster was certain Jack was over-estimating himself again.

Jack was still having nightmares, after all. His home had been destroyed. He'd put a good face on it, but when he thought he was unobserved… Aster had seen that distant gaze and pained expression before. On his own face, before he started avoiding mirrors. It suited Jack even less than it suited Aster.

So yes, he was staying close. If Jack started having issues, he'd insist on their leaving. If it hurt Jack to help in the curse breaking…

Well, if that happened, North would have to figure out a way for Jack to help at a distance. Aster wasn't about to let his friend be sacrificed for his people, but he also wasn't willing to leave his people suffering as fearlings. But it wouldn't come to that, he was sure. North understood the problems Jack was having with the fearlings. He wouldn't design a cure that involved exposing Jack to something that would frighten him.

"Any closer," Jack murmured, as they approached the door. "And we'll have to have a long talk about cell osmosis."

He shoved the door open before Aster could reply - what did that even mean, anyways? - and swaggered into the room. "Hello, minion," Jack said, waving at North. What. "Hello, other people."

"Minion?" Katherine asked, sounding irked, just a touch.

"Jack is ranking winter spirit," North explained. "Technically speaking, I am minion like cats are minions."

"Complete asshole who likes shoving things off tables to see what happens?" Jack asked, and sprawled out in an empty chair. He grinned at the range of expressions he got; Tooth, who liked cats,
looked fit to bust a gut laughing, except she was clinging to her dignity with everything she had. North, who didn't like cats, looked annoyed at being called an asshole. Sandy was snickering, though from the way he kept glancing at North, it was more at the old Russian's expression than anything.

Ombric and Katherine looked put out. "I like cats," Katherine muttered, so that was probably why. Nightlight just looked like he was suspecting Jack had gone entirely insane. Which… was valid, honestly.

Aster sat down in the chair next to Jack, and rested one hand on the lunatic's head. "You're not allowed to have minions."

"What about a cat?" Jack grinned at him. "I mean, spirit cat of some kind. There's got to be a billion over in Egypt."

He almost snapped a reply, but… Jack might've been grinning, but the way his eyes crinkled at the corners spoke of strain, not good humor.

Oh.

He was deflecting.

Aster leaned over and pressed his forehead to Jack's. "We'll talk after we've got some walls and a roof, how's that?" he suggested.

Jack's smile dropped, and he just looked shocked and a little worried. Then, he swallowed, and grinned again. "Yeah, sure, Fluffy. Walls, a roof… maybe a floor but let's not get too wild and crazy here…"

"Focus," Ombric chided, and turned to North. "I assume you have an update, Nicholas?"

Aster stared at North, instead of yanking Jack into his lap and cuddling. North, for his part, nodded.

"Will need both technology and magic to break curse. Is very nasty thing, like oil slicks. We must contain the oil when we remove it from the Pooka, or it will only seek to gain new host."

Jack shuddered, and leaned back until he was resting against Aster's side. "Yeah, let's avoid that."

"Containing infection is where Jack and I focus," North said, surprisingly enough. Jack just nodded. "Shards… well, shards is wrong word, but is best of wrong word. Shards of nightmare create fearlings. Shards of nightmare are what winter spirits deal with."

"Deal with?" Nightlight repeated, staring at the two winter spirits. "Deal with how?"

Jack straightened up, expression clearing in a way Aster hadn't seen since the fearling attack. That vicious twist to his lips, though, was straight from General Winter's party, years back. Technically a smile. Even not so technically. It just wasn't a nice expression. "Draw a line in the sand and beat down anything that crosses it, essentially."

Nightlight stared at Jack, and then looked away. "It isn't that simple."

"Never is. But there's a lot of winter spirits. Not as many places for Nightmare to try getting a foothold, anymore." Jack paused, the vicious expression fading somewhat. "Go figure, the industrial revolution was good for something."

"What was wrong -" Katherine began.

Tooth held up one hand. "Unless you want Bunny to detail all the many ways the industrial revolution went wrong, and Jack to egg him on, no. Do not finish that question. I, at least, do not have a week to waste listening to the rant."

"Hey!" It wasn't a rant. It was a summary of a rant.

Jack perked up. "Wait, really? How come you've never shared that with me?"

"Remind me when we've got time," Aster said, finishing off with a sigh. It wasn't like he liked talking about the industrial revolution and its many, many errors. Just like he didn't like talking about British colonialism. Still, if Jack asked… alcohol. Enough alcohol to make talking about it worth it.

"We do not have time," Tooth said, and shook her head. "Back to the matter - North? You and Jack will contain the… nightmare pieces?"

"Yes, will be pure magic, that. The purification process will be the mechanical and magic together. Magic to contain fearlings while process works, magic to separate nightmare off. Am thinking… best thing for this would be First Light." North leveled a significant look at Aster.

Aster thought about it. The First Light hadn't left the Warren since… Pangaea, right near the end of it. First time he'd touched it, he'd gotten his markings, though they'd been subtle, then. Second time, it'd bleached out his fur, leaving him monochrome, gray and white and black. And that was nothing compared to the sensation of holding something kin to the sun. Light, and heat, and power.

"Sounds fair," he said, controlling his tone and expression. He wanted to channel that power again, and he never wanted to look at the First Light for the rest of his life.

"Ombric, need you to enchant the mechanics, and Katherine, you and Nightlight to help with the building. Later you will need to help Pooka move away from nightmare pieces."

"Yeti aren't helping?" Jack asked.

"Yeti, elves… would be too many hands in pot. Er." North paused, looking confused.

Tooth left her seat and moved to hover at North's shoulder. "Before we do anything, you need to sleep," she chided, though gently. "You've been wearing yourself out, and with Christmas coming."

"We shouldn't do this before or on the solstice," Jack observed. "Nightmare. Containment. Annual beat-down. You know."

Aster leaned forward and wrapped an arm around Jack's shoulders. "You fight Nightmare, mate?" he asked.

"Not with fisticuffs," Jack protested, leaning back into the contact.

Katherine pointed at Tooth. "You said - and I didn't believe you!" She paused, and lowered her hand. "I'm sorry about that."

Tooth smiled, and settled down until she was perching on North's shoulder. It made her look smaller, in Aster's opinion, and he suspected she didn't mind. "I'll just be here, smug. Basking in the air of 'I told you so'."

"I eat meals," North lied. "Anyways, building will take lots of time, won't be done before New Years. Enough time past solstice?"

"Should be. Just after we've renewed the… ugh, seal isn't right. Line in the sand, then. The equinoxes have never really seemed important for that?" Jack shrugged, and straightened up. It meant pulling out of the hug, but he didn't seem bothered by it. "At least, I've never been involved with anything on the equinoxes that way. Other stuff, but not lines in sand and epic beat downs."

Aster rolled his eyes. "Why do I have a feeling it's less epic and more you standing around staring at nothing?"

"You're just saying that 'cause it's how I deal with blizzards."

Ombric cleared his throat. "I assume you have drafted plans for the… purification chamber?"

"It is a chamber," North agreed. "And purpose is to purify. Yes. Will have yeti bring to you. Not elf. Elves are busy. Making doll clothes. Sudden upsurge in dolls, everyone is wanting one. Elves are having no time to muck in electricity, so busy making doll clothes."

Aster shared a look with Nightlight, and smiled. "I'll bring out the First Light last thing," he said. "For the best. Don't want it out of the Warren too long, the googie plants are a mite fragile."

"Don't you replant them every year anyways?" Katherine asked.

"The Light's the source for the enchantments that let 'em grow. Don't want to re-do that, takes forever."
Bunny had been giving him odd looks, but Jack didn't think he'd... reacted inappropriately. He was a winter spirit. If he didn't want his blood to run hot, metaphor or no, it wouldn't. Which meant he was a perfectly respectable bed-mate with no inconvenient physical reactions.

*Thank goodness*.

Bunny entered the room, and raised one eyebrow at Jack, curled up at the window. "Keep in mind, you start brooding, I'm dragging you to the kitchen for hot chocky and cookies," he warned.

"I'm not brooding." Much. Maybe. Probably not, anyways. "Just enjoying the view."

Bunny snorted, and sat down on the bed. Jack felt his cheeks flush, and quickly looked back out the window. If only North hadn't taken classes on guest room design from the same people who did all the cheap motel rooms. Maybe then there'd be proper chairs. And places other than the bed to sit.

While he was wishing, he might as well toss out the faint hope Bunny stopped looking quite that comfortable perched on the bed like that. A bit mean, yes, but considering the way his body had rebelled on him... Well. He needed all the help he could get, and instead of help, circumstances were sabotaging him.

Almost four decades - that long, really? - living together, and not a spark. Second his home got destroyed, and he wanted to start... well. Doing things he had no business doing, thank you very much, especially not with his oblivious best friend. Bunny was a heavy sleeper, he'd never notice if Jack's hands wandered... which was why he was not going to do that!

"Jack?" Bunny touched Jack's shoulder, and the winter spirit nearly jumped through the window. As it was, he banged his head off the glass, flailed, and fell off the window seat at Bunny's feet.

Smooth. Nothing at all like how he wanted to look, especially... no. No trying to impress the best friend. That way, at least.

"You sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine," Jack protested, and then cleared his throat. Sounding like he'd inhaled a lungful of helium, bad. Hilarious, but bad. "I'm fine. Just. Thinking."

Bunny folded his arms, the motion drawing his shirt tight across his shoulders and biceps. "Thinking," he repeated, apparently oblivious to the way Jack's brain had just turned off. "Right. What, exactly, are you thinking about?"

Oh yeah, no, not going to answer that. "Things." Jack rubbed the back of his head, and stood up. "Very important things. What're you going to do when the Pooka are cured?" And wasn't *that* a subtle change of subject. Worthy of North.

"I've already said I'm not moving out or taking a mate," Bunny said. He reached over and started poking Jack's head, where he'd banged it off the window and the floor. It hurt, but it was Bunny, so... and Jack might have had a problem. Or two.

This was why lust was for strangers. It made things so much simpler when you saw them once for a couple of hours, never talked to them, and never saw them again.

"That wasn't... what about adoption, though?" Jack leaned into the touching, and then pulled away when common sense gave him a nudge. "I mean, we're only guessing they're adults, or all adults, or -" Bunny was still *petting* him. "You can stop that? Any time?"
"That a question, mate?" Bunny asked, and then pulled Jack into a hug.

Which was. Very. Very much a hug. Yes.

Jack hid his expression in Bunny's chest, which didn't exactly help but at least Bunny couldn't see how Jack blushed. Jack didn't even know how he blushed, whether he turned colours like regular people or had his cheeks covered with frost or… well. He didn't know. Wasn't much inclined to find out, either.

"If there's any tin lids in the mix…” Jack felt, as much as heard, the way Bunny's voice wavered at the thought. "Then I reckon we'll be hauling 'em out of trouble by the scruffs plenty. I mean. If you want to help."

And he was definitely blushing, whatever form that took. Felt like his head was on fire. "Yeah. Of course. Baby Pooka are probably adorable."

"Less so when they're teething on your ears," Bunny drawled. "But yeah. All eyes and ears and paws. More fluff than brains, and our bodies are capable of more, younger, than a human the same age."

He'd probably squeal at the sight of one, then. "But if they're adults. You're sure you don't want -"

"Jack." Bunny didn't pull away, because Jack had a death grip on his waist and wasn't letting go. Face still on fire, if it took three weeks he was going to keep his face hidden. Maybe enough exposure would put things back to normal and he wouldn't feel all warm and fluttery around Bunny.

Bunny sighed, and started petting Jack's hair again. "Jack. I told you. I get everything I want out of our friendship. Maybe if I wasn't sayach I'd feel differently, if only 'cause I do want kits. As is, I'm sayach and even if I were interested, any sane Pooka wouldn't be. Especially with… well, things. As they are. Numbers-wise."

Jack relaxed his grip, and tilted his head back so he could look up at Bunny. "Maybe there'd be a way," he suggested. "I mean, in vitro fertilization's come a lot of steps. They don't even need eggs or swimmers - well, they need eggs, but you know what I mean."

"Vaguely," Bunny said, sounding amused, as well as thoughtful. "Bit of my DNA, bit of someone else's, maybe a volunteer egg…”

"Presto-chango, baby Bunnymund," Jack concluded. "I mean, it's a thought. If there aren't any kits to adopt."

Bunny squeezed Jack, and grinned. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"You got stuck on the idea of never having kids?" he suggested. "Or - can Pooka cross with humans, even?"

"Theoretically," Bunny said, and let Jack go. After a second, Jack followed suit, vaguely regretful. It'd been a nice hug, awkwardness aside. "Pooka could have kits with quite a few human-appearing species, back during the Golden Age. And a few fish-types," he added, looking vaguely disturbed.


"If it works, mate, don't knock it."
So, this fic is getting longer than I thought it ever would (43 chapters? I was thinking we'd have past the fearling thing by now, but nooo... what happens when you start writing a fic with a meandering idea of what to do and where to go, I guess.) so I'm considering finishing this fic up quickly, with a sequel/continuation when I hit a good stopping point. I'll let you know when I find it.
Aster was almost relieved that the purification ritual wouldn't happen until after the New Year. Granted, it did mean the Pooka were fearlings longer, but they didn't seem to be bothered by it. Now that they were settled into the holding pen, they spent most of their time sleeping or chewing on the branches and fruit dropped in daily. Some of them even made attempts at grooming their companions. If they hadn't been monstrous in appearance, it would have even been sweet.

As it was, things were busy. No one really had any time to work on the ritual, charge the mechanical bits and bobs with magic. Even Ombric got swindled into helping with the Christmas preparations, though there was less swindling than his grumbling suggested. North had just burst into overworked tears, shoved the lists into Ombric's arms, and then went outside for a few hours to scream at the glaciers.

In a way, Aster was actually rather grateful Easter was a lower-key holiday than Christmas. Sure, belief wasn't as fervent, but at the same time he wasn't under the pressure to get everything exactly perfect. As long as he had two or three eggs per child, it was fine. And when it came to regionally appropriate these days, it was chocolate. Only the designs changed per country.

Jack seemed to be everywhere, doing less physical work and more… stress relief. Where the yeti were getting snappish and looking like they were about to bludgeon each other with dolls, Jack showed up with a snowball fight and laughter. When the elves began to sulk after they'd gotten shoved out of the way one too many times, Jack turned the edges of stairs into ice slides and an empty room into a skating rink. When North needed to go out and scream at glaciers, Jack brought out mugs of cocoa dosed with vodka and kept him company. When Aster began to feel the familiar irritation of Christmas, Jack distracted him with questions about Easter and painting patterns and what the layout of their home should be.

The layout of their home was a very distracting topic, but not… necessarily in a pleasant way. Aster couldn't put his finger on why, not for longer than he liked. While talking about the plantings and the designs he wanted to use this year, he was relaxed, content. When talking about the house layout, he was tense.

He did figure it out. He only tensed when Jack asked if Aster thought the other Pooka would want to live in their house. Or if they should have several guest rooms.

The realization sent him to the Warren, unsettled and… sad. Jack meant well, offering his space to the Pooka, but Aster just… didn't want to share. The thought made him want to bristle, and growl, and throw the intruders out.

Because he wasn't thinking of them as his people. The thought of other Pooka, in his space… they would be intruders. Any welcome he could offer would be grudging at best. Kits, that was one thing, that was… well. A dream come true. But adults?

Oh, no. The thought of an adult Pooka, tall and colourful and refined, examining everything, examining Jack …

It made him feel like chocolate wasn't necessary for six arms and an extra hundred pounds of muscle.
Jack visited him, and Aster waved him off with a few comments about the egg plants, checking the bulbs waiting to get planted. Jack accepted the brush-off with good nature, wrangling Aster into a promise to show up at the Workshop after Christmas, if he was gone that long. He looked disappointed when he left, but he did go. Good thing, too, because his visit had clarified what, exactly, was wrong with Aster.

It wasn't that he didn't want other Pooka in his home.

He didn't want other Pooka around Jack.

The thought made him want to maim something.

Because he was short, had never finished growing before… things. Before he'd touched the First Light, his physical age frozen in place. He'd never gotten adult colours, and then of course the second time he'd used the Light, his fur had gotten bleached out, which was even worse than getting stuck with kitten-colours. He was cranky when provoked, when out of his comfort level, when dealing with more than one or two people at a time or strangers.

And Jack… Jack's paleness wasn't washed out, it was vibrant. Besides, he was human, the rules of attraction were different for him. He was bright and clever and strong. He helped people. His skin was clear, his movements were graceful, and his laugh was like music. And his neck. His long, slender neck, veins showing through as a gentle trace of blue.

Aster wanted to bite it.

He wanted to grip the back of Jack's neck between his teeth, hold the smaller male still as he slid into him. He wanted to lick and nuzzle the soft skin just below Jack's ears, to make him giggle and squirm. He wanted to suck and nip love-bites everywhere he could, mark that neck and the man it belonged to as his. Claim and warning in one.

He'd gone forty years aware of Jack's beauty, but only now was it really hitting him.

Jack was a catch. A beautiful, loving, wonderful catch that anyone would be lucky to call partner.

Aster wanted to be the one calling him partner. Wanted to be the one to strip Jack naked every night, press kisses to soft skin and softer lips, wanted to hold hands. Wanted to do things that'd get them kicked out of every church currently in existence, too, but details.

It was a highly inconvenient realization.

Equally inconvenient, now that he'd had his realization, he couldn't stop thinking about it. Jack had never exhibited body-shyness around Aster, possibly because he was a Pooka, possibly because Jack was just… Jack. So Aster knew how Jack looked when naked, oh yes. He'd never seen Jack do anything deliberately sexual, but his imagination filled in the blanks, even when he tried not to.

And his body responded. Enthusiastically and frequently. At one point, he wasn't sure he quite dared to return to the Workshop. He probably smelt like… like sex, and the oil he'd started using when things started to get a bit raw-feeling, and the thought of looking Jack in the face after the things he'd imagined doing…

He hadn't felt this embarrassed since he'd been actually nineteen, not just physically stuck there. It wasn't fair. Back when his hormones would've been useful to him, he'd barely been interested in experimenting with his peers. Now that he was… old… he was lusting after a spirit not quite three hundred and fifty, who wasn't even interested back.
Aster sulked around the Warren until Christmas, and would have sulked longer except North showed up at the end of his run and threatened to shove him into a sack.

That could not stand. But he had to go back to the Workshop. And somehow figure out how to look Jack in the face. Without giving the poor fellow a show.

It was going to be impossible, he just knew it.

Aster opened the Workshop doors and found the place silent.

Well, he reflected, shoving the doors closed against a blast of arctic wind. Not silent, it was hard to achieve silence even in the deepest caves, but it was quiet. There was the odd creak as the wooden beams settled, a fairly steady rattle from the wind against the shutters, but the workfloor was abandoned. Sawdust lay in drifts along the floor and against the wall, freshly dried paint splattered the tables. There weren't any toy planes and helicopters to threaten his ears, no elves underfoot, no yeti rushing back and forth yelling at each other to be heard over everyone else yelling at each other.

Unsettling.

He rolled his shoulders, and hurried through the work spaces until he reached the living quarters. There, he could hear North's snoring, muffled by at least two doors, probably more like five, or at least half the wing. It was a relief to turn away from that noise, to the guest room he'd been sharing with Jack.

Aster was tempted to drag his feet, but pulled on a bit of the self-discipline the Pookan warriors had been famed for, and walked at a regular speed. It might have technically been a march, even. He got to the guest room door in good time, and then hesitated. On the one hand, he wanted to knock. On the other, he'd never knocked before.

He shoved the door open and walked inside.

Jack looked up from where he was sprawled on the bed, a slightly battered book in one hand. It was in German and didn't look familiar, so it was probably borrowed from North's library. "You live!" he chirped, looking pleased.

Aster felt himself flush, a wash of heat creeping up his neck and over his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. "Uh, yeah," he stammered. "Warren's good. All prepped for... Easter."

"Well suck it up, Buttercup, got you a Christmas present." Jack set the book aside and sat up, cross legged. Aster's gaze dropped to where Jack's pants were pulled tight across the crotch, and then forced his eyes up. If he stared at Jack's chest, he was unlikely to see anything that might cause... problems.

"You didn't have to," he protested, a few seconds too late. Jack gave him an odd look, and then smirked.

"I never have to. I always do. Did you remember to eat, in the Warren?"

Sort of. "I ate. And slept," he added, cutting Jack off before he could ask the next question. "I didn't get you anything."

"You can help me with floorplans and rebuilding plans," Jack said. "Instead of looking like you just sucked on a lemon and taking off five minutes in."
Aster blinked. "Lemons are sweet, when they're not picked early."

"That's what you got out of that? Close your eyes. Present time."

He huffed, and sat down on the bed first. Jack chortled, and moved around once Aster had closed his eyes. The room was just strange enough that Aster wasn't able to track exactly what Jack was doing. Moving to a door - the wardrobe? Not the door to the hallway, or the bathroom - opening and closing it. A waft of pine, but there were pinecones in every fireplace and wreaths on almost every door. It would have been strange if he hadn't smelt pine.

"Okay," Jack said. He sounded like he was smiling. "You can look now."


And then he looked at his gift.

"Oh," he breathed, his insides going to water. In a good way. His parents' tree. "Are you…? Really?" He laughed, reaching for the pot. Jack handed it over, grin switching to a beam.

"Yeah," he said. "A couple branch tips got banged up, and it was a little dry, but otherwise… tada. It's a-okay. Nothing else in your studio survived," he admitted, wryly resigned to the twist of fate, "but the tree's okay."

He'd had some good artwork in there. "Oh, well," Aster said, and sighed. "It's just pictures. Shrines are more important."

"Kinda figured. Merry Christmas, Scrooge."

Aster fussed over the tree for a few minutes, thankful for the distraction. The branches had already done the vegetable equivalent of scabbing over, with hardened sap over the tips. The soil was just damp enough. He got it positioned by the window, picked off a few dead needles, and turned away only when there was nothing else he could do.

Jack, once more on the bed, smiled at him.

That expression should've been illegal, Aster thought, even as he moved over to sit next to Jack. Next to, not on. Because one, they were friends, not… romantically intimate. And two, he was bigger than Jack and denser, at least two and a half times Jack's weight. He'd crush the poor man.

"So," he breathed, leaning over to nuzzle at Jack's hair. He was mortal, he was weak, he was enjoying the way Jack's hair smelt. Sue him. "You said something about floorplans?"

Jack cleared his throat. "Yeah," he said, and stood up. "Let me grab my notebook. I've been making lists."

Lists, not drawings… Fine, Aster could do the rough sketches. He was no architect, they'd have to go to a yeti if they wanted something more professional. "What were you thinking?"

Jack waved a cheap-looking spiral notebook at him. It looked cheap, probably the cheapest thing that could be found in the Workshop, though the paper was of good enough quality. "Guest bedrooms," he said.

"Denied," Aster replied, in a tone only a little better than a growl. After a moment, he cleared his throat and did his best to calm down. Jack was looking at him like he'd lost his mind, which helped a little, strangely enough. "If the cured Pooka are adults, not kits, they might want to live in the
Warren. It's what I created it for, back, well. You know. It'd need a bit of work, but then the living portion could be all theirs. And if they want to live in your domain, maybe cabins all their own, for privacy?"

"Yeah," Jack said, drawing the word out. "We can do that. And if they're kits?"

Oh, life would be so much easier if they were kits. Small, dull-coated, fluffy-furred kits. Cute little bundles of mischief and innocence. "Pookan habit was to all pile together in the bed, until the kit decided they were old enough to sleep on their own. Or needed the privacy," he added, smirking a little. No few friends of his had decided it was better to be lonely at night than stifle their hormones. Aster had never seen the appeal, and continued to sleep in his parents' bed until he'd left for his duty tour.

"Sounds pretty much like my childhood," Jack said, looking more wistful than he sounded. "My sister and I only moved to our own bed because we were getting too big, but we remained in the same… well, our house only had one room, but you get the idea."

Aster chuckled. "Yeah. I do. So if there's kits, you wouldn't be opposed to the cuddling plan?"

"Nah, that'd be fine. It'd have to be a very big bed, I think, but I can manage that." Jack grinned. "So no guest room."

"Our friends, even if they're sloshed, are only a snow globe away from their homes," Aster pointed out. "So no guest rooms."

Jack snickered, and crossed out something in the notebook. He tapped his pencil against the paper, and chewed on his bottom lip. Aster stared at Jack's mouth, suddenly entranced. When Jack stopped chewing, his bottom lip was faintly puffy and flushed pink.

Thankfully, Aster had fur. No one could tell he was blushing.

"What about separate bedrooms?" Jack asked quietly.

*Bugger that*, Aster thought. He opened his mouth to say as much, and slammed his mouth into Jack's instead.

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Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late post, everyone. I knew I was going to be tired, but not how tired. (Long story short, agreed to work a different shift this week - 12 hour days on Saturday and Sunday. Following my 5 day week of normal evening shifts. I was so tired I never even thought about Cabin and basically fell asleep when I got home.) Anyways, fic! And oh look someone's gotten a clue.
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Smut

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jack yelped, but the sound was muffled and indistinct. Bunny continued to kiss the skin just above Jack's mouth, before he apparently realized his error and moved his lips lower. He moved fast, which was probably why their teeth clacked together.

That sound, Jack reflected, in the distant corner of his mind not currently flailing madly, had been louder than his yelp.

Something warm and rough pressed between his lips, and he bit down automatically.

Bunny yanked back so fast he fell off the bed.

Wait. That'd been Bunny's tongue. Shit, fuck, he'd bit Bunny's tongue. Not in the plan, not in the plan at all.

Jack scrabbled after Bunny, ending up sprawled out on his stomach, head hanging off the edge of the bed. "Cottontail?"

Bunny glared up at him, and then stuck his tongue out and stared cross-eyed down at the bitten tip. He had a… very long tongue, Jack realized, and swallowed hard. Longer than a human's, and it looked rough like a cat's.

How was he supposed to get that back in his mouth?

Asking was probably a good way.

"Did you just kiss me?"

Bunny looked up at him, and his ears immediately fell down to droop against his shoulder. After a moment, he drew his tongue back into his mouth, and looked sheepish. " Might have. At that."

Jack blinked several times. "Sorry for biting you," he said, finally. He might have sounded odd, distant, but he was still stuck on Bunny's tongue. "You should do it again, it'll be better when I'm not surprised."

Bunny made a surprised sound. "Again? You want - really?"

"Now would be good," he encouraged the Pooka. "Or five seconds ago, if you can do that, but -" Oh. Lips. Jack hummed into the contact, and freed one arm to loop it around Bunny's neck. The kiss was slightly less frantic than before, and Bunny managed to match their mouths up better from the start. No teeth clacked, and when Jack felt Bunny's tongue press against his lips, he wasn't surprised.

Definitely different, he thought, leaning into the contact. Bunny's tongue was longer, of course, and it was rough on top in a way human tongues just weren't.
He tasted the way clover smelled.

Eventually Jack needed to breathe, though he really could have done without. Bunny must have run out of air as well, because he began to pull back at the same time Jack did.

Jack gasped for breath for a few seconds, and then grinned. "No separate bedrooms," he agreed, and shifted forwards just enough to press the tip of his nose to Bunny's. Bunny closed his eyes and hummed, shifting from his knees onto all fours, pressing into the contact.

After a bit, though, his neck began to hurt from holding his head up. Jack rolled away, until he was on the middle of the bed. The whole thing rocked and shifted when Bunny climbed up onto the bed, following him, and he grinned.

The Pooka did not, as Jack half-hoped, sprawl out on top of Jack. Instead, he laid down with his head pillowed on Jack's stomach, one of Jack's hands caught in both of his.

"You don't mind?" Bunny asked, voice ever so faintly hoarse.

"What, the kissing? First one… my teeth hurt," he admitted. "Second was great. Bet it'll get better with practice, though."

Bunny snorted. "No, that I want to kiss you."

Did it bother him? "Load off my mind," he admitted in a croak. "I hate being the only one doing or feeling something. And if we want to kiss each other, there will be more kissing." He lifted his head up and stared at Bunny. "Tell me how that's a bad thing."

Bunny grinned at him, and then sobered. "And what about more than kissing?" he whispered.


"Just good?" The Pooka huffed, and paused. "Jack?"

"Blood go south. Not in brain. Um." He paused. "Maybe you wanna move." Please, no, he liked Bunny right where he was. Wait, no, there were better places.

Wait, no. He was an adult, he could be an adult, he could… shut up while Bunny shifted until he was lying on top of Jack.

Adulthood could go to hell. In a handbasket.

"Ah," Bunny said, and made a low, rumbling sound deep in his chest. "I see." He shifted, and Jack groaned. Apparently he wasn't the only one with blood gone south of the waist. It felt good, even through way too many clothes. "Should I -?"

"Move," Jack growled, and braced his hands against the bedspread. Then he jerked his hips up, rubbing their erections together.

Bunny made that rumbling sound, and pressed down against him.

It was fast, and messy, but fuck, Jack needed it. Right now. He'd spent weeks cuddling Bunny, soft fur and warm body and stupid lust and now he could do something and not only that, but Bunny wanted the same thing.

And then every muscle went tight and his world lit up, like he was struck by lightning only without the pain. He might have yelled.
When the spots cleared, Bunny was still rubbing down against him, growling. Jack managed to fumble a hand between them and did his best to rub through the Pooka's trousers. Bunny's growling got louder, his hips moved faster, and then he tensed all over. Bunny clenched his eyes shut, lips pulled back to show his teeth all the way back to his molars, fur puffed up. And then he collapsed on top of Jack like a puppet with the strings cut.

He grunted, and nosed against Jack’s neck.

"Yeah," Jack agreed, and wrapped his arms around Bunny's shoulders. Granted, now that they'd finished up, he kinda felt gross. They probably should have taken their pants off first. That was... leather and sticky wetness, and... ew. "Uh. I need to change my pants."

Bunny actually hissed, but rolled off to the side. "Fine." He paused, and groaned. "Me too."

"Do you think," Jack asked, quickly peeling his soiled leathers off. "We should invest in condoms? Supposedly they reduce mess."

"Wouldn't do me any good," Bunny said mournfully. He held up his soiled trousers, and then tossed them off into a corner. "Shape's just a bit different, they won't stay on."

Jack blinked, and then fell back against the bed, snickering.

"What?"

"The fact," he said, and snickered some more. "The fact that you know that..."

After a moment, Bunny started to chuckle too. "Oh, rack off, you bloody show pony," he said, nosing against Jack's neck again.

"Rather kiss you some more," he mumbled, and tilted his head so Bunny could get to his neck easily.

After a second, Bunny stopped nuzzling him. Jack couldn't be too sorry, though, because the Pooka started kissing him.

He really couldn't feel a bit sorry about that.

Aster felt horribly obvious, but he just couldn't stop smiling. At Jack, primarily. Jack, who smiled back and bumped their hips or shoulders together. Jack, who kept touching Aster, shoulders and arms and waist, nothing that he hadn't done before but the frequency had increased, and the touches lingered.

Whenever he stepped outside of their shared room, it felt like a flashing sign hung over head, "besotted fool" and an arrow pointing down at him. He honestly didn't care.

Because he'd loved Jack for a long time, loved him and cared for him and relied on him, but he was only now realizing just how long he'd been in love with Jack. And now, love and lust and the delight that was knowing he was loved and lusted for back...

He was happy.

He liked being happy.

Being happy made him want to do things. There was a new lilt to his voice that could turn to singing far too easily, but Pooka had never been shy about that, and he had a good singing voice. He just didn't want to sing his conversations. His friends wouldn't understand. Same with the dancing,
though thankfully he could pass that off as Capo katas. Dancing had always been heavily influenced by martial arts, and vice versa, for the Pooka.

"Bunny, this is arctic!" North joked, more than once. "Flowers should bloom *south* of circle." But he never seemed to mind the way his walls became covered with ivy and flowering vines, trailing along in Aster's wake.

He woke every morning with a light in his heart and Jack in his arms, and went to sleep every night with bright joy in his veins and its Guardian beneath him.

The two of them talked, late at night, between gentle touches and teasing pokes. Jack was horribly ticklish, and if Aster poked him *just so* in the ribs, he collapsed into a giggling mess. That first realization aside, things had felt too bright and new to wreck with *sex*, so everything had been more exploratory than erotic. Aster didn't mind, and Jack seemed more than content.

And there was kissing. They were getting very, *very* good at the kissing.

Too quickly, it was the middle of January, and North said it was time to set things in place to purify the fearlings.

Aster pecked Jack on the lips before ducking into his Warren. The others saw, and he didn't care. The whole world could see. He was happy, and there was nothing to hide.

Chapter End Notes

So who's been looking forward to this chapter? I'd apologize that it's a bit short, but in exchange you get smut.

Also, fair warning, at some point I'll be bringing this story to a close, and probably that same week starting up it's sequel, A Heart, A Future. The thing with Heart/Home is, the... central theme is all about getting Bunny happy and home. But I have plans for other stuff that isn't quite the same, and also this thing is getting scary-long, so. Might as well just chop it in two, keep going, under a new title. So keep an eye out for that, hopefully in a few months.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jack lounged on his staff, only half his attention on the matter at hand. "It looks like a decontamination shower," he said, and tilted his head to the side. "Only way bigger."

North waved one hand in dismissal. He was striding back and forth, a sheaf of technical drawings in hand, and every so often he’d bawl out a correction at the yeti. Ombric and Nightlight focused on each piece as it was slotted into place and secured, and Jack didn't think it was his imagination that had the metal glowing.

"I think that's the point," Tooth said, flying backwards to get a better look. "Decontamination shower, purification shower… Not much difference, when you think about the intent behind it all."

"As long as there's no unicorn water," Jack muttered. Tooth snickered, and smirked over at the oblivious North. "Well, maybe, as long as we ensured he was the one explaining."

"Be nice." Tooth moved a little higher, and called out to the yeti, "Tilt it to the left!" Then she dropped back down to Jack's level, grinning.

"What?" he asked. Yes, it was good they were pretty much ready to cure the Pooka, but that didn't explain how happy she looked.

"That kiss," she said, and Jack felt himself flush. Her grin widened, and her crest stood up. "Oh, I see. I suppose Bunny would want his people around," she added, inexplicably.

Jack wrinkled his nose, flush or no flush. "What are you -?"

"Oh, bother - no, that's upside down!" Tooth darted over to a pair of yeti hoisting a clear piece of… glass or plastic, Jack had no idea. Presumably it was so they could see what was going on, but the yeti appeared to be putting it on the roof, so who even knew.

He as just as relieved at the respite as he was confused about what the heck the clear panel was for. It just seemed awkward, the idea of talking to people about his and Bunny's relationship. Besides, Tooth, North, and Sandy were all uninterested in the new facet to things, beyond the fact that it was romantic now. And the opportunity to gossip. He didn't know Katherine, Nightlight, or Ombric well enough to talk to them about things.

He didn't really want to talk about his romance with Bunny, anyways. It was too new for that. Like the first, delicate curls of frost on a windowpane, a warm breath at the wrong moment could erase it all.

Jack didn't think his friendship with Bunny would suffer, and he was reasonably sure their romance was stronger than he feared, but still.

Sandy drifted over to sit next to him, his glow dimmed but not out. Jack raised one eyebrow. "You? Tired?"

Sandy mocked a yawn, but then nodded, waggling his hand back and forth in a so-so gesture. Well, he'd been doing something to the decontamination shower, so it must've taken something out of him. Jack dug into his sweater pocket and pulled out a granola bar, still wrapped in the edible rice paper
the yeti used. Sandy waved it off, but with the sigil Jack understood to mean 'thanks'.

Jack shrugged, and tucked the granola bar back into his pocket. He went back to watching the shower get built, but it was rather boring. The construction of his own home aside - and he'd been the one doing most of the labour, then - he didn't really find architecture to be all that interesting. So watching the yeti work gave his mind ample time to wander away from the work to come, and down other avenues.

Avenues where he got to caress soft, gray fur, dig his fingers into a nicely muscled haunch. Or the kissing. Jack really liked the kissing, and he was aware he had a soppy grin on his face, but didn't care. Kissing Bunny was the best thing ever, over and above the fumbling about he'd done as a mortal. He hadn't really been interested, beyond mild curiosity, back then.

He must've been making up for that lack of interest, because wow. Very interested. Yes.

Sandy snapped his fingers in front of Jack's eyes, and smirked when the winter spirit almost fell backwards off his staff.

"That wasn't nice," he protested. Sandy looked innocent, even setting a halo overhead with his sand. "Liar."

Sandy replied with a series of hearts, that he set to float around Jack's head. He waved them off. Sandy mocked a hurt expression.

"If you boys are done," Katherine said, walking up. "We need you again," she told Sandy. The Sandman nodded and floated back towards the decontamination shower. Katherine, surprisingly, didn't follow him. Instead she smiled up at Jack. He smiled back, faintly unsure.

After a few awkward seconds, Katherine cleared her throat. "I didn't know what to think, when they told me you and Bunny were living together," she said. "It wasn't done, in my time."

"You're time is a few decades younger than mine," Jack said easily. Katherine looked surprised. "Yeah, I don't show my age. Blame my mother's side, Natives have a hard time growing a beard."

"Native? You don't look… pardon." Katherine's blush was a little blotchy, stronger across the bridge of her nose, weaker across her cheeks. "That was rude. You're a spirit."

"A winter spirit," he agreed. "I'm a typical American mutt; German, English, French, Shawnee. During the summer I got a little darker than my grandmother's family, but my hair went almost blond." And during the winter he'd go almost as pale as his dad's family, both sides, and his hair got dark, as if he'd run a walnut stain through it. "I went lecustic after I became a spirit."

"Yes, well," Katherine said. Her blush began to fade, and her smile was easy. "You know what I mean, though. About… well. Two men."

"Yeah. You should've heard the gossip about my cousin." Single father, young son, no female relatives nearby and smoke from Darren's attempts at making dinner at least once a week. "But we take care of each other, Bunny and me."

"Bunny and I," Katherine muttered. Must've been one of those grammar fanatics, though Jack thought he remembered something about her being a writer. "And yes, I was told that you do. And he's much happier than when we were last all together."

Jack flicked a snowflake at her nose, and grinned when it burst into blue sparkles. Katherine giggled, and pressed her fingers against her cheek. "Guardian of Joy," he said, with mock-solemnity.
"Pleased to meet you."

"Oh, hush, it's nothing to do with your Guardianship," she protested. "No, it's… you make him happy. And I'm so glad that you do. I just wanted to say that. Especially now," she added, looking fit to burst into giggles again.

"That… that means a lot," he admitted. He supposed it was inevitable that people would be talking to him and Bunny, now, to give them their support. Sure, the spirit-world was much better than the mortal one, when it came to two guys hooking up. Or two girls. Or more than two, in any combination. Of course, better didn't mean perfect, and there'd probably be some unpleasant individuals.

And, well, having his friends' approval meant a lot. After all, he'd been born a few decades before Katherine, and Pennsylvania might have been slightly more lenient about… sexual deviances… but that didn't mean much. Jack honestly couldn't say whether his parents would have supported his chosen partner, or if they'd have disowned him. Or worse. He'd never know the answer to that question. At least he knew about the other Guardians.

"I imagine it does," Katherine said, sobering slightly. "Well. I am glad for the two of you, Jack. Have you talked to Bunny about the ceremony yet?"

Ceremony. What? "No ooooo ot yet," he said. "Why. What do you know that I don't?"

Did Pooka have ceremonies when they entered into romances? Did it involve singing? Bunny'd been singing a lot lately, it probably involved singing. Or dancing. Jack could probably manage singing, but -

"I know plenty you don't," Katherine said, cutting into his thoughts. Good thing too, they'd started to get a bit panicked. "But nothing about Pookan ceremonies. I just thought he'd want one."

"I'll have to talk to him about it. Later." Pooka probably didn't have ceremonies for new romances, Jack decided, when Katherine went back to the building work. Bunny had never even suggested such a thing, so… Panic was unnecessary.

Although if Pooka were supposed to serenade their partners… As long as it wasn't in public, he'd probably manage just fine. As long as it wasn't rude to stand with his back to Bunny and his eyes screwed shut.

Ugh, singing…

Aster jumped out of the tunnel, and immediately checked the purification chamber. It looked like the last touches were being put on now, and would be ready for the fearlings - the Pooka - within the hour. His stomach twisted with nerves at the thought, but he shoved the worry aside and checked for Jack next.

Jack was off to the side, watching the construction from his perch on his staff. He looked relaxed, and beautiful of course. Just the sight of his mate - his mate! All his! - had some of Aster's anxiety easing off. Not all of it, but enough.

He started towards the winter spirit, aware with every step of the worn leather bag he held with both hands. It was probably imagination, the faint heat radiating from the bag, the way the leather was a few shades lighter than it'd been before he left the Warren. But then again, considering the awe-full power of the artifact, just about anything was possible.
He was only a few feet away from Jack when his *mate* - Aster was well aware he was mentally squealing with delight every time he thought that, and *did not care* - pointed at the bag, head tilted to the side in inquiry. "Is that thing glowing?"

Not imagination, then. "Probably. How're you doing?"

Jack snickered, and leaned over at a gravity-defying angle to drop a quick kiss on Aster's nose. "My part won't start until we get the shadows off of them. I'm fine. After, we'll have to see. Might need some cuddles to recover."

Aster huffed, and moved closer so Jack didn't look like he was just starting to fall. "Mercenary," he said, and wrapped one arm around the winter spirit's waist. "I'll cuddle you for free."

"Oh, well, in *that* case," Jack said, and laughed. "So Katherine talked to me, while you were gone."

The Pooka turned and looked over at Katherine, helping with the purification chamber. "Yeah?"

"She's happy for us."

Aster smiled, chest feeling warm. "That's nice," he said. "That's... good. I'm glad."

"Me too." Jack sighed, and shifted until he had one arm wrapped over Aster's shoulders. "Good to know no one's going to chase me off with rocks."

Right, humans were weird. "Well, technically speaking," he began. Jack snorted. "Technically smecknically. You use male pronouns, you're a guy. And I'm a guy. Two guys being romantic at each other?" The winter spirit shrugged. "And I was born in the late sixteen-hundreds, remember."

Aster wasn't entirely certain what Jack's birth-date had to do with anything, but it apparently meant something to Jack. "Well, I'd have been shocked down to my bones if us being together bothered anyone. Knowing the others," he added, pulling back to smirk. "They probably had bets going on how long it'd take."

"Really?" Jack asked, and shook his head. "Just 'cause we live together?"

"Romance wouldn't be the only betting options," he said, twisting his ears. Had he heard...?

North had turned towards them, and he must have heard the old Russian laugh, because now he was beaming. And approaching. The purification chamber must have been finished, and just in time. It would work best if the moon was directly overhead, and it was just moving to that point.

"Bunny! Wonderful timing. Sorry to interrupt," North said, with a decidedly smug grin. Sorry. Right. Aster would have to interrupt North's time with Tooth, he'd be just as sorry. "But you have the First Light?"

He held up the bag in answer. "Guess it's time?"

"Yes, Sandy is getting fearlings with yeti. Jack, if you would go stand at far end?" North pointed to the side opposite the Workshop. Coincidentally, it was the side where there were no windows. Jack wouldn't be able to see the fearlings when they arrived in the chamber and the purification process began.

Jack dropped down off his staff, and flicked it up and forward over his shoulder before his feet hit
"Don't worry, Bunny," he said. He reached over and wrapped an arm around Aster's waist. "It'll be fine."

"Sure." Aster hugged Jack back, and frowned as the winter spirit moved away, taking in spot by the purification chamber. "What are you two gonna do again?"

"Winter things. Nearly impossible to explain, even to each other." North patted Aster on the shoulder. "Come this way, you will need to stand by the main window."

Right. Aster took a deep breath, and told the butterflies to stop flying around or at least pay rent. This was going to work. He knew it would. Between all of them, it was going to work and there would be other Pooka around again.

He wasn't sure what would be better, having adults around? Or kits?

Soon. Very soon.

Aster glanced to either side; he was bracketed by Katherine and Nightlight. North stood between Katherine and Jack; Ombric stood beside Nightlight, ready to step into place once the fearlings were in the chamber and the door closed. Tooth hovered overhead, closer to Katherine.

He heard a shriek, sounding at once far off and very near. Sandy was moving the fearlings, using his sand to urge them down the hallway and into the purification chamber. As calm as they'd been, as tame as they'd been acting, clearly their goodwill was now at an end. Aster heard several more shrieks, each one seeming angrier than the last.

North looked over to the side, to Jack, positioned where Aster couldn't see him. "Steady on," he said.

"I'm fine." Aster closed his eyes at the peevish tone to Jack's voice, but didn't argue. Jack wasn't fine, obviously, but he had to believe he was. Otherwise he wouldn't get through it.

One of the fearlings screamed in pure rage, and charged into the purification chamber. Aster nearly jumped back; it was the biggest of the fearlings, patterned red and black with spikes along the spine. It stared out the window, seemingly directly at him, and snarled. Like a shark, the fearling had several rows of sharp teeth.

"Oh, I hope their teeth get better when they're cured," Tooth moaned.

Katherine giggled. "Bunny's teeth are lovely, theirs will be too."

The rest of the fearlings crowded into the chamber, chased by threads of golden sand. The snarled and snapped at each other, the walls, the windows. Several clawed their neighbors, seemingly less out of malice than in an attempt to climb over each other. Sandy closed the door, sealing them in.

The fearlings went mad. One actually bounded off the window in front of Aster, knocking into its neighbors, while the rest began to claw at the ground, the walls, reached up and tore at the ceiling with their talons.

"I believe we should begin," North said, sounding mild as milk. He might have been watching a nature documentary or something, and Aster shot him an annoyed look.

"Fine." They'd talked, vaguely, about what part each of them would play. Aster had focused mainly on his part and on Jack's, and he doubted anyone would or could blame him for that. Of everyone, their parts were the most… involved. And in Jack's case, the most dangerous.
But he couldn't worry about that any longer. Aster untied the drawstring holding the leather bag closed, and pulled the mouth of the bag open. It felt like he was moving through thin glue. He reached into the bag, the pads of his fingers and palm beginning to burn, though curiously without pain. The sensation was more academic, and despite the way he could feel his flesh burn off, transmuting to dust in an instant, he was able to pick up the Last Light and pull it from the bag with no issue.

He couldn't see it, it was too bright for that, but it felt a little like he was holding one of his googies. Aster's vision whitened out. The Light reached for him, and he was consumed.

Any other time, any other place, he'd have been terrified. There was nothing. He was nothing. An awareness, floating in a void made of light and heat. The Light caressed the edges of his awareness, and if it could be said to be anything, it was... curious. Distantly, something much greater than a human looking down at a lone ant and wondering how does that work? What drives it?

He hung, forever, in that light. And then -

Between one second and the next -

He dropped.

Aster fell to his knees, one hand pressed against the dirt, gasping. Sweat slicked his fur down to his skin, from the tips of his ears to the pads of his toes. He was naked, clothes burnt off from the - from the everything, heat and light and pressure. Aster's pulse pounded in his ears, drowning everything else out, as effectively isolating him as holding the Light had.

Sweat dripped off his nose and chin, and froze the instant the drops touched the ice. He, though, felt warm, or at least numb. It was cold, should have been cold, but he just could not stop sweating.

Aster looked up, peering through the steam that surrounded him. The Last Light was - no, it was there, back in the bag, the leather bleached a pure white. White even to Pookan eyes, and most of what humans considered white was actually a very pale gray, blue, pink... This, though, was very much white.

The ice was, for the most part, undamaged from the Light. The containment chamber... what Aster could see of it had been charred, errant breezes tugging flecks of ash from the walls and windows. His friends were further away from him than they'd started, but appeared unharmed.

"Bunny!" Tooth shook herself, and darted forward. Her wings made the steam billow and disperse, revealing more of... everything to him. "Oh, you're soaked - North! Your coat! Blankets or something!"

"I'm fine," he mumbled. Exhausted, apparently - yes, he could feel it now, definitely exhausted - but not cold.

"Hush, you clearly..." Tooth grabbed him by the bicep and hauled him upright, but his knees didn't want to lock and he sagged back down to the ice. "Uh, help?"

Aster hung his head, aware in a distant way of his friends holding him up, of the sweat sliding down his body and freezing in itchy lines on his sides and back. Someone had the bag holding the Last Light; he could feel it, on the edge of awareness, a prickle in the back of his mind. The awareness would fade, but until then it was going to itch at him.

Jack shouted, a wordless, defiant sound. Aster blinked, and lifted his head, though it felt like his
eyelashes were weighed down with lead bricks, never mind the rest of him.

By the time he'd lifted his head enough to look around, Jack was walking over to him. He looked as spent as Aster felt, eyes dull, feet dragging.

Jack’s hair had been frozen into spikes.

"It's done," Jack rasped, voice nearly gone. He braced himself with his staff, and bowed his head. "Let's get 'em outta that thing."

Yes. Aster managed to find enough strength to stand up straight, though he shook like an aspen in a strong wind. "Let's," he said, and stepped forward.

Or tried .

He stumbled, twisted away from helping hands and fell into Jack. They hit the ice, not hard, exactly, but he was winded when Ombric and Nightlight helped him back up. Jack winced as Katherine and Tooth pulled him to his feet.

"Let's try that again, with less pride this time," Ombric suggested.

North stood at the door to the purification chamber, the yeti having pulled the guiding walls away already. There was a small crowd still waiting, watching, but Aster couldn't really begrudge them.

What colours would he see, when they opened that door? Kitten tan, mint green, pastel pink? Or adult ruby, sapphire, emerald? Some mix of the two extremes?

"Ready?" North asked, beaming.

Aster nodded, and stared at the door. North began to open it, and he strained his eyes for a hint of colour, a suggestion of movement.

He wheezed, sagging against Ombric and Nightlight, mind gone blank with shock.

There were a dozen of them, huddled together. Six adults, four sub-adults, and two kittens.

Not Pooka.

Kelpie .

Chapter End Notes

In a way I wish this chapter could've been shorter, but then you'd have missed the lovely realization Bunny has just come to. Poor baby. -cackles- Oh, but how did Mother Nature miss this? She's the one who said they were pretty much 100% Pooka...
Jack wrapped a seventh blanket around Bunny's shoulders, as much because the Pooka was shaking, as because Jack was shaking and he needed something to do. Probably for different reasons, he really doubted Bunny had been overcome with rage and passed out. Sort of. Mentally passed out while the rage and hate had used his body to turn the inky black ooze, the shards of nightmare, into nothing. The aftermath of blacking out had to be better than freezing and also finding out the Pooka weren't actually Pooka.

Whatever they were, they were pretty cute. Jack glanced into the room the not-Pooka had been herded into, not really surprised that North had something like a little slice of boreal forest in the room with a side of one-way mirrors to watch what was going on in there.

The fearlings had been ugly and awful. These not-Pooka were built a little like Bunny, the way chimpanzze were built a little like humans. Like chimpanzees, the not-Pooka had shorter torsos, broader shoulders, and preferred moving about on all… fours wasn't quite the right word, with these not-Pooka. They had six limbs, four arms and two legs.

Jack sat down next to Bunny, and leaned against the blanket-wrapped form. "So," he said, breaking the quiet. "What are they?"

Bunny huddled deeper into the blankets. "Kelpie."

… Yeah, no, those creatures did not look like horses. Or sheepdogs. "Um, what?"


"No," Bunny said, and then shook his head. "No. I. What?"

"You said kelpie," Jack offered. He lifted a corner of blanket, and wiped it over Bunny's cheek. Thank goodness the ice had melted, though it did leave his Pooka overly damp. "What's a kelpie in your words?"

At that, Bunny got a distant look in his eyes, but it wasn't the lifeless lack of interest from before. "Kelpie… Kelpie are like a cousin species. Human ancestors split off to become the great apes, including homo sapiens, yeah?"

Jack nodded. Basic evolutionary science, which had admittedly first horrified him and then amused him. Half the reason he could twirl his staff around by his toes was just because he'd wanted to see if he could. Gorillas could, after all, and humans were supposed to be related to them.

"Pooka and kelpie… The kelpie came first, and in some parts of our world, they stayed kelpie. Others, evolutionary pressures…" Aster spread his hands, dislodging a few of the blankets. "Ended up with Pooka. Stone tools and hiding in caves, but Pooka."

"So they're more like your evolutionary grandparents," Jack suggested. He tucked the blankets back over Bunny. "Probably why Mother Nature got tricked."

Bunny's eyes widened at that. "Yeah," he breathed. "That'd do it."
Jack looked through the viewing window at the kelpie, and sighed. They really were cute, especially the two smallest ones. The biggest of the kelpie had short, stubby horns between his ears, and his shaggy fur was patterned in green and darker green stripes. The rest of the kelpie were just as shaggy, but patterned in copper, brown, and tan, with two or three adding moss-green to the mix. None of them had horns. The two little ones were mottled tan and brown, with soft-looking fluff in place of fur.

"I'm sorry, Bunny." Jack sat down again, and leaned against the blanket mound. "I know you wanted other Pooka around."

Bunny swallowed, and lifted his head to look through the window at the kelpie. "It frightened me," he said. "Other Pooka. Adults, I mean."

Jack spared a thought of gratitude that the other Guardians weren't in the room. He had a feeling, more like a suspicion, that Bunny wouldn't talk freely about this around them. "Well, kids are generally cuter and more adaptable," he said.

Bunny shook his head. "No. I mean. I'm not…" He turned to Jack, expression strangely shy. "Contact with the First Light does things to a body. I haven't aged since I first touched it. And Pooka… Pooka don't get their adult colours until they're about twenty, twenty-one. I was nineteen."

"So, what, an adult would try bossing you around?" Jack asked. Then he blinked. "Wait, nineteen?"

The Pooka inclined his head. "That's right."

"You're a teenager." Oh, shit. "You're not even legal!"

Bunny scowled at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Jack grabbed his hair and yanked. It did not help. "I've been shacking up with a teenager and you're not even legal. I offered you beer, right? Or maybe it was wine, or -"

It was hard to talk, with Bunny's hand clamped over his mouth like that. The Pooka glared at him, which was at least better than the lost, sad expression had been. "I want you to stop and listen to yourself. One, not human, alcohol doesn't do anything for me. Two, nineteen. Nine. Not eight, not seven, nine. For several billion years. You, at a bare three hundred, would be the child. Not me."

Jack twisted away, and grinned. "Except physically, apparently. I'm older than you."

Bunny closed his eyes, and his lips moved as he… counted backwards? Jack smirked. "No, you're not."

"Twenty-one, babe, I kinda am."

"Babe?" Bunny wrinkled his nose.

"You don't like it?"

"No. I do not."

Fair enough. Jack shrugged, and leaned against Bunny and his blankets again. "So. The gray's what a kid Pooka looks like?"

"Tan," Bunny grumbled. "My fur got bleached out last time I held the First Light. Dunno what it'll do to me this time. Which… isn't the point."
Not really, no. Jack hummed, and reached up to stroke Bunny's ears. The fur was only a little damp now, and Bunny leaned into the contact, eyes half-closed. It was peaceful, just sitting together like this, disappointment and all.

Jack wasn't sure how he felt about everything, honestly. He was disappointed on Bunny's behalf, disappointed that after all their work and worry they had a bunch of... alien gorillas, basically, to show for it.

At the same time, though, there were a dozen former-fearlings curled up in that room, snoozing in a pile. Fewer fearlings in the world could only be a good thing. And they had a process that was proven to work and, so far, showed no side effects. If and when - Jack wasn't going to kid himself, there would be a when - more fearlings showed up, they'd be ready.

Jack continued to stroke Bunny's ears. He had no idea what his Pooka was thinking, feeling. Couldn't really imagine it, either. He had no idea what it was like to be the last, and to be the last for... aeons. Sure, Jack had been alone for most of three centuries, but he hadn't been the only human. Even when the other spirits couldn't bother with him, there'd been a play or an opera or movie houses, other humans to watch, other people talking his language - sort of - to listen to. Bunny had gone longer than human existence with nothing but himself, whatever he'd brought with him, and the shrines he'd built for his people.

"We'll take them to the Warren," Bunny said, suddenly. Jack almost twitched from the shock, but he restrained himself. "It's already set up for Pooka. Only difference is kelpie don't like houses."

"These ones seem to be doing alright."

Bunny's smile was wane, but there. He leaned over and brushed his nose against Jack's. "You're adorable. They'll be happier in the Warren, and they'll keep the plants to a more manageable level."

"The egg fields, though."

"I can ward 'em. Be a good idea, keep the kelpie from trying to eat paint." Bunny shifted, knocking several blankets off again. "Not that it'd hurt 'em none, but for the best if they didn't, all the same."

"Aw, but the fluffies could be tie-dyed," Jack crooned. He probably totally deserved the exasperated expression, and he completely deserved the blanket dumped on his head. He pulled the blanket down, and dug into the pile until he found Bunny's hand. "Concealing a death wound' okay, or 'actually okay and not going to have nightmares or suck down the alcohol' okay?"

Bunny sighed, and shifted, until he could pull Jack into the blanket pile. It was warm and somewhat humid in there, with more than a hint of salt and musk and wet fur. Bunny had warmed up though, and it was nice, once they'd gotten slotted together in a way that wouldn't lead to cramped muscles or numb feet. Jack rested his head on the Pooka's chest, and waited.

"I've... yeah. I think I'm okay. No drinking or nightmares okay." Bunny sighed, and nuzzled against Jack's hair. "I blame you."

"Me?" Wait, blame?

Bunny stared up at the ceiling, though he clearly wasn't seeing the exposed beams or painted panels. "For a long time, I blamed myself. For surviving, when everyone else didn't. And then you kidnapped me."

Jack just blinked innocently up at Bunny. "And then?"
Bunny looked unimpressed, but continued. "And I stopped blaming myself. Don't even know when it happened, what sparked the change. But I was happy, and comfortable, and home. And yeah, I miss 'em. And yeah, there was a part of me that hoped the fearlings would turn out to be Pooka, even though…” His breathing was shuddery and shallow. "Even though it'd mean that the fearlings we'd killed coulda been Pooka too. But I was afraid, too, because of the whole…” He gestured vaguely.

"Physical age thing?" Jack suggested, feeling a twinge of misgiving himself. Bunny was physically a teenager.

"Yeah. That. And a few other things,” Bunny added, pulling Jack tighter against his chest. Jack raised one eyebrow. "I… well. I'm not very impressive compared to, uh. Adults."

"In other words, you were worried you wouldn't look pretty to me anymore? Dumbass."

"I don't like that pet name either."

"And yet it fits so well."

Bunny poked him in the side, claws first. "Maybe not the most reasonable of concerns," he said, and then snorted when Jack pressed his nose against the side of Bunny's neck. "I still had them."

"I know. So I guess there's an element of relief, as well?" Wow, that was the picture definition of a confused look. "They're dead. You've grieved. You've moved on and picked up habits that would've been, y'know, disapproved of back when they were alive. And then all that potential conflict just… vanished." Jack made a 'poof - it gone' gesture with his fingers.

Bunny stroked Jack's hair. "You've thought about it."

"Not necessarily about your people, but yeah, off and on. If you said you hadn't been, I'd have called you a lying liar who lied."

"Living above ground," Bunny said, strangely enough. "Pooka didn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Habit. Religion, a bit. Easier to dig into the earth than club a few trees into submission for wood. Easier to hide from predators."

Jack stroked Bunny's side, and hummed in sympathy. At least he'd seen a bit of the Pookan home-planet, thanks to Mother Nature. He had at least a little idea of what Bunny was describing. "I'm glad you don't want to get drunk," he said, relaxing at last. "I'm sorry they weren't Pooka kits, but I'm glad you're not too freaked out about it."

Bunny shifted beneath him, and stretched his legs out. "There's other fearlings," he said, fingers tracing gentle circles on Jack's shoulder. "Who knows? Just gotta get 'em here, and then we'll see."

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, Bunny's viewing this as a setback, not a complete ruination of his hopes. Also, Kelpie... didn't go into detail here, but Kelpie are important to the Pooka. I do plan to go into detail... later. For now, things are escalating.
If one more person asked if he was okay, Aster was going to burst into tears. Frustrated ones. Because he was fine. Yes, granted, the fearlings had turned out to be kelpie, not Pooka. And yes, he was disappointed, his hopes shattered. But he would be fine - well, mostly - if they stopped bringing it up.

North peered at him over the half-moon glasses perched on his nose. "Perhaps," he suggested, "we ask because we care and worry for you."

Aster stopped pacing, and all but threw himself backwards into a chair. "If they'd turned out to be Pooka and rejected me, that'd be one thing. Then I'd be… not fine. But they're kelpie, and every time I show my face they go starkers trying to groom me."

Which had been a shock, first time he'd come face to face with one of the kelpie does. He hadn't been scooped up and given a tongue-bath like that since he'd been five. And he doubted his mother had moved that quickly. Between the bath, the two kits combing through his fur for bugs, and the chief buck pinning him down and purring on him, it'd been… overwhelming.

A bit like those short videos of large dogs cuddling with small children, just without the terror of dogs.

"I haven't lost anything," he said, shaking the memories off. "And I'm the one who assumed what Mother Nature found meant 'Pooka', when I knew how close Pookan and kelpie genetics are." North raised an eyebrow. "Think… fraternal twins instead of identical. Or humans and their great apes. Pooka didn't have as big of a… a source group as humans, and kelpie had even fewer."

"Alright. But are you still -"

"North." Aster scratched a spot on his shoulder where the fur had been pulled in the wrong direction. Maybe he'd call that particular doe 'Martha'. She seemed like a 'Martha'. The name always put to mind a particular, nurturing personality, though he had no idea why. "It wasn't like it was promised or anything. No one put a bunch of Pooka in front of me, only to snatch them away and put the kelpie down instead. Besides." He looked up, and pointed a finger at North. "There's more fearlings out there. We have a process that works. Kelpie survived all this time, transformed, and there's less genetic difference between Pooka and kelpie than between humans and chimpanzees. If the kelpie survived, there's a good chance there's Pooka that survived, too."

At that, his friend's expression cleared. "That had honestly not occurred to me," he said, looking happier. "If that is so, we only need to draw the fearlings here, at a manageable pace."

"And until then, I'd be happy figuring out what Pitch is up to." And keeping Jack safe at his side. The winter spirit had gone off to consult with Marzanna, who was as much nightmares and darkness as winter and cold. Aster wasn't going to trust her; if she was under Jack's authority as a winter spirit, she was also under Pitch's authority as a fear spirit. And she'd had some time with Pitch keeping her company. Who knew what he'd convinced her of?

But Jack had insisted on going alone, and Aster was still exhausted after using the First Light. He was bouncing back, but apparently one of the changes was a temporary decrease in his stamina. Just
getting dressed in the morning was enough to flatten him; if meals weren't being delivered to their guest room, Aster didn't think he'd have had enough energy to eat.

At least he wasn't exhibiting any changes. Though how would he notice something subtle, like not aging? He'd gone three or four thousand years unaware of it, last time.

"You are right, he is acting strangely," North said, knocking Aster out of his thoughts. He needed a second to remember what North was replying to, and then nodded.

"This isn't like him. Attack, then vanish for yonks, then toss a few fearlings in our general direction, but not follow up."

"He tried to make Jack into fearling prince," North pointed out. "Though he did loose."

"And normally he'd twig on that his victim wasn't infected before getting punched in the face."

Someone knocked on the closed door, and they both swivelled to look at it. North yelled something in Russian, probably 'come in', and a yeti poked his head in. He garbled something at North, who frowned and nodded in reply.

"Feel up for short walk?" North asked. "Jack has returned. With a guest."

Aster blinked, and nodded. "Sure. Wonder what Marzanna's doing here?"

North moved around his desk, and offered his arm. "Let us go see."

It was shaming, after several yards, that Aster needed North's support, but he clenched his jaw and clung tight to North's arm, and continued walking. They crept along, half North's usual walking speed and a fourth of Aster's, until they came to an unfamiliar set of carved doors. They were very Art Nouveau, suggesting curving tree branches without, actually, being carved into a likeness of curving tree branches. Coloured glass had been cut and faceted like gemstones, and set into the wood, glowing with light reflected from nearby lamps.

A yeti - possibly the one that'd notified them, possibly a different one - swung one half of the doors open, and gestured them in.

Aster took a moment to look around at the room. His first thought was that North could not have had anything to do with the design or decoration of the room, as he preferred great swaths of colour and the straight lines and angles that had later inspired Art Deco. His second thought was that Tooth had also had nothing to do with the decoration, for she preferred styles and designs with more similarity to her native India than this.

The ceiling had been plastered over, which must have annoyed the elves, since they preferred the exposed beams for travel when not trying to trip people. As it was, the ceiling was the only plain part of the room.

There were sweeping curves, ornate curlicues painted on carved posts. The furniture had graceful arcs. If it could be carved, it was. If it could have silk-screened patterns, it did. There was less cushioning than normally found in North's chairs and couches, but it didn't look like that would detract from the comfort any.

"Where were you hiding this away?" he asked, feeling himself relax in the many shades of green, yellow, and wood. He'd always preferred the art nouveau in architecture, even if it made him squint in paintings.
Jack snickered, and Aster looked down at his mate - and yup, internal squeal, right on time. Jack looked good, a little tired, and he was sitting a little too close to a strange young woman for Aster's preference, but he wouldn't have been happy unless they were in different rooms.

The woman, the winter spirit, sat halfway down the table from Jack. She was, if he remembered right, some sort of Slavic goddess, but she was dressed as a British noblewoman from the late 1600's. The rich velvets were in dark shades of purple and black, embroidered with a blue thread so pale it appeared white. Her hair had been piled up on top of her head in a style that didn't flatter her square jaw and aquiline nose.

North shot Marzanna a look, and sat down between her and Jack. "Interesting costume," he said. "Who are you here as?"

"Britannia owed me a favour," she said, her accent closer to old Polish than the British noblewoman she appeared. "A bit of a glamour on my hair. I am not supposed to be here."

"Shadows were attacking Marzie," Jack said, and yawned. Aster immediately moved over to him, but Jack didn't seem to be hurt. Just tired. "She says Pitch, and I gotta agree."

"No fearlings, interestingly," Marzanna added, and shrugged. "Fear spirits have been going missing, of late. The youngest and weakest. Mothman's fine." She shrugged again, and made a face. "How does one breathe in this thing?"

"You don't," North pointed out. "You sit and look pretty. Mothman?"

"American," Jack said. "One of those paranormal, nineteen-sixty, is he real or is he just an owl…"

Marzanna smirked. "He has some very interesting friends. Werewolves. But the others… I don't know." She looked pensive, and then frustrated when she began to lean back and suddenly stopped. "Blasted idiocy… This is hardly the first time Pitch has gone through the lesser fear spirits as if they were candy. Generally before he makes a big strike against everyone. It's a bit like taking steroids, which is keeping with his being an idiot."

"Steroids?" Aster spluttered.

"Mm. I didn't sleep with him." It was North's turn to choke. "Big in power, small in…" Marzanna grinned, and held up her forefinger, only to curl it down. "Steroids. Makes you crazy, impotent, and more importantly to me, prone to nightmares of your own. They were quite tasty."

"Focus," Jack chided, turning to nuzzle into Aster's stomach.

"Yes, yes. I'm here in this useless rig, aren't I? Have some tolerance." Aster had no idea how her clothing related to her staying on topic. Nor did she elaborate. "You realize he is quite, quite insane, yes? He was loony a century or two ago, but now he's a bag of cats, and all of them are pissed off."

Jack snorted. "He tried to turn me into a fearling. Or a fearling prince. One or the other."

"It would never have worked," Marzanna said, sounding far too confident. "Spirits cannot be turned into fearlings, never mind fearling princes. The end result melts, which he should know, considering his experiments a few centuries back… never mind. The fact of the matter is, Pitch is no longer following logic as the rest of the world understands it. Still, those maddened as he is can still do a great deal of damage."

She frowned, looking somewhat pensive for a moment.
Jack straightened up, and folded his arms. "Okay, Marzie, what'd you do?"

"I?" she asked, and pressed one hand to her chest. "Whatever makes you think I did something?"

North cleared his throat, and sat down. "You are as much winter spirit as Jack or I, and we, at least, know the duties. You had being of fear and nightmare in your grasp. After, Pitch went silent, and now, is mad, as you say."

"Reasonable," Marzanna said, and smiled. "Toothiana must be quite pleased with you, you know logic. Such a rare thing. And yes, I did do things to him. Eat the power generated by his nightmares, for one." She paused, and pursed her lips. "Whether that did anything directly to him, I do not know. I couldn't do anything permanent," she added, leveling an annoyed stare on North. At the situation, Aster guessed. "I am as much fear as I am winter, and where the powers on the winter side would approve of a permanent action, the powers on the fear side, quite obviously, would not."

"Any guesses what Pitch'll do?" Aster inquired. "He might be crazy as a - how'd you put it, bag of enraged cats? - but it's still some form of logic."

Marzanna shrugged, and then made a face as she felt under her arm. "Damn corset. Why humans put up with it I do not know."

"Marzie."

She huffed. "I honestly don't know. He spoke mostly of how he hated the Guardians, how they stole you from him." She nodded at Jack. "Which is ridiculous of course, you'd never join the side of nightmares."

Jack leaned against Aster again, and when he looked down, the winter spirit was grinning soppily up at him. "Of course not," Jack said. "You think I'd have landed this guy if I were all dark and nasty?"

"Only by kidnapping," Aster drawled, and then flinched when Jack suddenly looked considering.

"No."

"Technically speaking, Persephone," Jack said, and snickered a little when Marzanna began to laugh. "Yeah, no, we're busy, I guess. Maybe later."

"Never. So, you don't know what Pitch'll do next, if anything," he said, turning to Marzanna. She looked amused at his attempt to bring the conversation back on track, but nodded.

"Unfortunately true. That said, now that he's munching up all the minor fear spirits, I doubt he's going to go back to hiding any time soon."

Aster grunted, and nodded. "Fair. Well, thank you for stopping by, I guess?" At this point, they were only repeating what'd been said, so there wasn't much point in continuing. At least for him. "North, mind if I borrow a portal? Gotta return the thing to the Warren. Don't want it out much longer."

North stood up, and brushed himself off. "Why don't I come with you? Marzanna, will you be staying?"

"Not if you paid me." Marzanna stood up, and scowled. "I have to get this rig back to Britannia before I pass out. If you're offering portals, I wouldn't mind borrowing one. Then I'd owe you, and I'll put a high price on it. No one should have a twenty inch waist."

"At least it's not fifteen," North said, and pulled a snow globe out of his pocket.
Jack stood up as well. "I'll go grab you the thing," he said, turning to Aster. "Save you the walk. Take a load off until I get back, would you?"

"I'm fine."

"You're swaying."

Oh, so he was. Aster sat down without further comment, ignoring Marzanna's smirk and North's amused grin. He was tired, so what? But the Light had already been out of the Warren for several days, and the only reason he wasn't more worried about it probably had something to do with his general exhaustion.

Marzanna left with little ceremony, mouth pinched tight as the corset forced her to stand straighter than militaries required. Aster caught her muttering some uncomplimentary things about the bustle, just as she stepped through the portal and pulled her skirts through.

"That was fun," North said, and settled down again. "Normally she is more active. Drinking and dancing and bonfires."

"And," Jack said, walking back into the room. He held the leather bag in one hand, looking both like he wanted to cradle it in his arms and also like it had less appeal than a dead rat. "Her usual celebration falls on the spring equinox, and involves those blown egg things you like so much."

Aster blinked, and took the leather bag from Jack. "How's she a winter spirit, then?"

"Has to die before spring can begin."

He shook his head, and looked over at North. "Portal?"

"Of course. Are you coming with?" he asked, looking over at Jack.

Jack shrugged, and moved over to help prop Aster up. "Sure, why not. I'll use the tunnels to get to Burgess from there, got a few things to check."

"A few things?" Aster wrapped an arm over his mate's shoulders, and tugged him close. "What things?"

"Jamie things. Well, and last time Pitch was using the forest by my lake as a gateway or something, right? After talking with Marzie I kinda want to do a quick patrol, make sure he's not in the area."

North hummed in agreement, and shook the snow globe. "It is not bad plan. I will give you a snow globe as well, so you can let us know if you find him. Or anything else."

He turned and threw the globe. Aster squinted, the Warren not looking quite right through the portal's distortion, but it was probably just from not having the Light there. The three of them walked through the portal, Jack under one arm and North holding onto his shoulder on the other side.

Through, though, Aster stumbled to a stop, eyes wide. He almost dropped the Light, fingers gone numb with shock.

The portal had dropped them out on the edge of the egg fields, probably because that was the section North knew best. Normally, the space was something of a large, grass-and-moss covered bowl, with the dozens of permanent tunnels forming a steep wall to one side, and shallower, tree-covered slopes covering two others. The paint river wandered through, mostly off to one side, with the paint-vines and such between where the egg-plants sprouted and the tunnels, a natural funnel for the eggs to
walk down. There were tall, moss-covered pillars, egg golems and carvings in the shape of egg golems, and it was the tamest, most open part of his Warren.

It looked like there'd been a fire.

No. Worse. An oil slick followed by a fire.

Several of the permanent tunnels had collapsed, when they'd stood for thousands of years without a crack. The grass was dead, and slick underfoot. The moss had turned into a black, slimy mess. The trees were all dead, fallen over and shattered to pieces, the stumps poking up like broken, rotting teeth.

Aster moved forward, unable to believe what he was seeing, but unable to disbelieve, either. One of the great pillars had toppled, and lay in sections along the earth, where pieces weren't missing entirely. Broken egg golems lay scattered across the fields, like toys discarded by a petulant child.

The egg-plants were dead. The vines were dead. Sections, where the vegetation had been heaped up, smouldered as though the fire had just died off. The paint river no longer flowed with multiple, pastel colours, but glopped, brown and gray and black.

This wasn't just the First Light being removed. He'd checked, the Warren should have been good for centuries. Only the protections -

Only the protections. That kept bad things out. Like Pitch Black. Like…

Pitch, who Marzanna described as 'absolutely insane'.

Pitch, who had already destroyed Jack's home, tried to turn Jack into a fearling prince.

Pitch, who might have lost his last grip on logic but still hated, fiercely. Who had hated Aster the longest, wanted to hurt him the most.

"Jack?" he said, voice wavering, unable to look away from the destruction. He could only see the egg fields. What about the rest of the Warren? What about Easter? There was a reason he'd switched to magical plants.

"I'm here, Bunny."


And then he burst into tears.

Chapter End Notes

Yes. I did it. And I'm not sorry.
Chapter 49

This chapter. Was so difficult. To write. I'm not actually 100% pleased with it - everything I wanted to happen, happened, but it feels a little choppy to me. Oh well.

Tooth settled down on the couch beside Jack, her scimitars a reassuring weight on either hip. The padded jerkin was less welcome, but better the slight feeling of constraint than a mortal blow. North had helped her, as it was the devil's own time to work her wings through the back on her own. In turn, she had helped North with his own arming, a padded tunic covered by chain mail, covered by yet another tunic and his heavy red coat. Swords, more knives than she had fingers and toes, and a halberd presented a delightfully intimidating picture.

In contrast, Aster was only lightly armed and then only with his boomerangs and what North could force on him from the weapons vault. Moon-touched bowie knives, of course, long enough some cultures would have considered them short swords. North had had to wrap Aster's hands around the hilts several times, before some neuron fired off at another, and now it'd be taking one's life into one's hands to try and get those knives away. Aster wasn't about to let go.

Sandy was completely unarmed, though he would, as ever, be the most effective fighter against Pitch. Where the rest of them could only fight Pitch's shadows when the Nightmare King was making them solid, Sandy could fight them all the time. And, as someone who didn't bleed, he was staying close to Aster, keeping a careful eye on… things.

North was mustering his yeti, directing them in how to peel the taint out of the Warren and get something of a blank canvas for Aster to work with. Tooth supposed that left her to check in with Jack, who looked very winter at the moment.

"Are you… alright?" she asked, suddenly hesitant. Normally, Jack was bright and active and brimming with enthusiasm. Be it spreading snow and joy, or racing Tooth and her girls through the night in a hunt for shed teeth, he was rarely still. Even in his cabin, where he had always seemed more settled, he was warm and alive.

Now, he was still, the way of ice statues and marble carvings. His sweater had frosted over, until it appeared nearly all white. And she didn't think he'd blinked since sitting down an hour ago.

Jack turned his head, eyes unmoving, until he was staring at her. She was reminded obscurely of owls, who couldn't turn their eyes, but owls didn't have eyes that glowed ever so faintly blue, or lips pressed into a thin, white line. "Tactical nukes."

… No, that didn't make sense even after thinking about it for a minute. "Beg pardon?"

"Where can we get tactical nukes." Why wasn't that a question? Had Jack suddenly become allergic to questions?

"Jack, dear, no nukes. Radiation is bad."

"Pitch deserves it," Jack said. His voice was thick, similar in a way to how North sounded when
tipsy and enunciating everything very carefully. She doubted the emotions were the same, and if Jack was tipsy, it wasn't off alcohol. Rage, possibly.

"Well, of course he does, but the rest of the world does not." Jack just stared at her, nose wrinkled. Tooth waited, but apparently words were being very hard today. Understandable, of course, though frustrating. "Jack. Nuking Pitch will only make things worse. It is better to go in with knives and Sandy."

That, at least, got a response. "I want to kill him."

"Yes, I do too, but -"  

"He hurt Bunny."

Tooth rubbed her forehead. "I know, Jack. We'll find some way to seal him into a... a rock or something, I don't know." Without sacrificing one of their number, no less. If it was possibly, North would find the spell. Or create it. "I'm sure being sealed away is even worse than death, for him."

Jack just stared at her for a long, long moment, before turning his head and staring at Bunny. "He hurt him. I'm going to kill him."

At some point, she really needed to remind Jack about proper nouns. Names would help avoid confusing statements like that one. At least she could be reasonably confident that Jack wouldn't be going after Bunny.

"Jack. We're really not supposed to -"

"I. Don't. Care." Tooth shut her mouth; Jack's eyes were glowing brighter, and the air temperature was dropping. "He. Hurt . Bunny."

Tooth sighed, and finally yielded. "Alright," she said. It'd be almost impossible for Jack to actually kill Pitch, as hard as actually killing a Guardian would be. Tied to the children as they were, they could endure... quite a bit, as long as there was at least one child left believing. There really was no point in arguing with Jack about it, either.

The thought of Jack, bright and cheerful as he was, venting his rage on Pitch, was not the most comfortable of mental images. But, she reassured herself, Jack was a winter spirit. With few exceptions, the winter spirits preferred to fight from a distance.

She resolved to keep an eye on Jack, just in case. Or perhaps mention it to Sandy, keep the two distance fighters close together.

It would be an easier fight if they could keep Bunny and Jack away from it, but since that wasn't an option, they would just have to keep the two boys safe.

North strode towards her, halberd in one hand, a snow globe in the other. "Pitch's lair is located," he said. "Ready?"

Tooth eyed Jack, and then Bunny. "Yes," she said, and caught Sandy's eye. He nodded. Thank goodness. "I think we are."

North threw the snow globe.

Jack's first reaction to Pitch's lair was to flinch.
Last time, the lair had been near Burgess, slightly cool in a clammy way, everything monochrome and dark enough Jack had strained to make out details. It had been stone and blackened iron, and except for the captive fairies and Pitch talking, pretty much silent.


The walls were still stone, shiny black stuff that looked like it'd melted. Obsidian, maybe. Paler stone made up the floor and strange mounds that vented out a coloured gas. At least half of the gas vents appeared to be on fire. There were trenches on the floor, *also* filled with stuff that burned. There were raised craters, and the liquid inside was a bright, bubbling red. It couldn't be lava, the same way the steaming red liquid pouring down the walls in artful spots couldn't be lava, but it really, *really* looked like media depictions of lava.

And it was *hot*. Jack hadn't been here for more than a minute, and he was already sweating through his sweater. North, wearing more layers, was gasping.

As a cure for frozen, incoherent rage, it was effective. Jack wouldn't recommend it to anyone else, though.

"Well," Tooth said, edging away from a gas vent. It wasn't one of the ones on fire, but it looked like fire would be inevitable. "This is different."

Bunny looked around, and huffed. "Looks like Ionio," he said, strangely enough. "Smells better, though."

Ionio must have been a planet or something, Jack supposed. A volcanic one. He shook his head. "So, let's find Pitch."

At that reminder, Bunny grinned, and lifted one of the knives North had given him. "Yeah. Let's."


Jack snorted, and concentrated. A snowball formed in one hand. "I prefer frostbite."

"Winter spirits do," Pitch purred, from some invisible point. The Guardians whirled, four individuals standing back to back, Jack off to one side. By choice.

The way he was feeling, he didn't want any of his friends too close. They might get hurt.

"Didja learn that from Marzie?" he drawled, and spun his staff between his fingers once. "Or did someone else nip you?"

A shadow where there shouldn't have been one shifted along one wall. Jack kept an eye on it, but didn't expect that to be Pitch. Besides, North was watching that shadow as well. The other three were watching everything else.

"Marzanna," Pitch said, voice echoing strangely through the hissing fumaroles and uneven walls. "I didn't expect her to teach me things. But wouldn't you know it? She did. And I will pay her back for every last… lesson."

Tooth frowned, and twitched an eyebrow at Jack. He shrugged in reply. Marzanna had said she didn't sleep with Pitch, and he believed her - she had standards - but she was also a winter spirit alongside being a fear spirit. There might have been a little tormenting involved, even bloodshed, though he didn't think she'd actively *torture* someone.
All the winter spirits knew he disapproved of that sort of thing. They might not have had one true leader, the last Voice of Winter dying long before Jack had even been born… but Jack was one of the stronger winter spirits, and as such, an authority. If he didn't approve of torture, most winter spirits would toe the line.

Then again, it was Pitch. Right now, Jack was more than willing to make an exception to his 'no torture' rule.

"What'd she do, teach you manners?" he taunted.

Pitch snarled, and stepped out of seemingly solid wall. Nowhere near where the shadow had been, of course. "I will crush you like the bug you are!"

Ice .

Jack shot his frost-lightning at Pitch. The Nightmare King dodged out of the way, but Sandy was there, streams and rivers of golden sand spreading around him like knife-edged octopus arms.

The ice sublimated in the heat, actually screeching as it went from freezing cold to boiling steam in under a second. Jack waved one hand, and the steam billowed up and over the Guardians, not touching them.

Pitch wasn't so lucky. He bellowed, stepped back into a wall, and then the nightmares arrived.

No fearlings. Jack was happy enough to not see those monsters. Yay for purifying them or whatever, and at least Bunny hadn't been utterly crushed at the fearlings not being Pooka the way they'd expected, but… fearlings. He did not like. At all.

He settled into the pattern of blasting nightmares, dodging, checking on Bunny, and blasting more nightmares. Bunny didn't seem to notice when he was being flanked, so Jack took care of him.

The Pooka was hyper-aware of the few times Pitch showed his face. Once, Pitch was on the other side of the battlefield, armed with a black-bladed sword and after North. Bunny crossed the field in three bounds, bowie knives at the ready. If Pitch hadn't vanished into the wall, Bunny would've gutted him.

The next time, Pitch was just feet away, and Bunny clashed with him. Pitch managed to block all of Bunny's blows, but only just. A rush of nightmares knocked Bunny away, and he and Jack were too busy taking down the nightmares to stop Pitch from going after Tooth.

Tooth was more than capable of holding her own. She had her two curved swords, and turned into a bit of a tornado, swords seemingly everywhere.

And then Pitch vanished into the dark walls again, leaving them facing the nightmares.

It wasn't a hard fight, exactly. Not like the first time Jack had tangled with Pitch, or even the second, that Easter Sunday. Then, the Guardians had been dealing with a loss of belief, and the surprise of fighting nightmares. Now, well… they had belief, and the nightmares were old hat.

It just wasn't easy. The nightmares melted and reformed and there were a lot of them. The fire everywhere limited movement, especially for the grounded fighters, who couldn't fly around the flames. Jack's ice didn't stick around, either, and the scream and explosion of ice turning to steam was as frequent as the battle-roars of the nightmares.

"C'mon, Pitch," Jack called, drifting to hover with his back to a burning fumarole. Sure,
uncomfortable, but the one direction he couldn't be attacked from. "What kinda swordsman are you?"

His only warning was a low chuckle. "The backstabbing kind," Pitch said, and then -

Pain. Jack screamed, twisting away, the blade scraping over his ribs. He felt it, felt the blade catch on bone and slice through flesh. Pain.

He dropped to the ground. Pitch spun the sword free with a flourish, and brought it down in an overhead chop.

Jack got his staff between him and the sword just in time. He gasped, the sword biting halfway through the wood, and sticking. Felt like he was being stabbed again.

Pitch pulled his sword up, and the staff was torn out of Jack's faltering grasp.

Pitch pulled the staff off the sword blade. Grinned.

Threw the staff into the nearest fire-pit.

Jack's staff didn't burn. He knew that. He'd fought fire-spirits before. He'd even been surprised by a forest fire once. It didn't burn.

It burned, like oil-soaked tinder.

Jack screamed, blood boiling and flesh melting and bones on fire. He screamed, and writhed against the ground, blood burning-hot on his torn flesh.

It was almost a relief, when Pitch stabbed him through the chest
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was his fault.

Aster lay beside Jack in the narrow bed, the mattress hard and the sheets scratchy even through his fur. He couldn’t imagine how Jack handled it, wearing a paper gown and nothing else.

Then again, Jack was unconscious. He likely didn't know.

Aster did. He could have avoided the discomfort; the yeti had brought in first a chair, and then a second cot, but he refused to move. A numb arm and leg were nothing, compared to… to…

He couldn't think it. So he didn't. He lay on his side, next to Jack but not touching him, and strained his ears and his eyes. Ears, for a heartbeat that was currently so weak at times he thought it'd stopped. Eyes, for sign that Jack was getting better, stronger, that the worst wasn't going to happen.

Jack was a spirit, after all, a powerful one. And a Guardian. It was winter in North America, when Jack was at his strongest. He had thousands of believers giving him strength. There was no reason to think he wouldn't get better, even when - no, don't think about it.

Aster just had to have faith. Hope. Believe. Jack would get better.

He had no awareness of time passing, only the space between Jack's breaths, the pauses in his heartbeat. Only that, and the memory.

Rage, as hot and all-consuming as the fire they fought in and through. Jack's scream like a bucket of ice water to the face. Aster had spun away from the nightmare he'd been fighting, heedless to any risk to himself, just in time to see Jack knocked to the ground, staff held up to block the black-bladed sword as it swung down.

And then the staff had been thrown into the fire and consumed. Aster didn't want to think about what that'd done to Jack, the staff had been like a fifth limb, the channel he used for his magic. He didn't want to think what the dark magic Pitch had used to create the fire had done to Jack, either.

As if that wasn't enough, Pitch had stabbed Jack through the - no. Not thinking about it.

He just couldn't think of anything else. Jack's breathing, Jack's heartbeat, the memory just circling over and over through his mind's eye.

It was his fault. He'd thrown good sense out the window and Jack had taken care of him and now Jack was paying the price.

Because Aster had been so busy trying to get revenge, he hadn't been watching out for Jack. Or watching out for himself. If he'd been paying attention, could Pitch have gotten so close to his mate? He doubted it.

"Bunny."

North's hand was large enough to cover Aster's entire upper arm, nearly shoulder to elbow. His breath hitched at the touch, gentle and warm, and he curled up a little tighter around Jack, clenched
his eyes shut.

No. Leave him alone. Leave him with Jack and his failure. "You have not moved in four days. You are worrying the yeti. You are worrying Sandy.

"Bunny," North repeated, still sounding so kind. "Tooth and I, we too are worried. We are all together worried. Please. Look at me."

Aster hissed, and shifted so he could press the flat of his nose to Jack's shoulder. Jack smelt of sickness, of sweat and pain and painkillers, of the disinfectant the yeti used to keep the small medical room clean. Underneath all that, he still smelt of ice and pine and the wind on the mountaintops.

"Please, my friend."

North was a fucking cheater. Aster opened his eyes, almost alarmed at how hard it was but without the energy to care, and slowly rolled until he was on his back, able to look over at North behind him.

"What."

"You live," North said, smile barely visible beneath his beard. "I was beginning to wonder."

Aster just stared at him. Of course he was alive. He couldn't hurt this much and be dead, after all.

Not like - no.

North took a deep breath, clearly bracing himself. "You must be ready for the possibility."

"No!"

"Not death!" North leaned forward, hands hovering over Aster as though he'd stopped halfway through a grab. "Not… death. More like Sandy, when he was… injured."

Aster sucked in a breath. "Sandy died." And came back. Evening of Easter Sunday, possibly after midnight, something that made him squint if he thought about it too long. It hadn't had anything to do with human religion, but belief was belief, and coming back from the dead was always going to be easier if done at certain times.

"In a way. But he was badly injured. By a weapon… similar to what Pitch used on Jack, Sandy says. And losing his staff might have the same effect as losing belief." North closed his eyes, head bowed and shoulders slumped. "You must consider that possibility."

No. He didn't want to.

"Jack's not going to die."

"Bunny." North opened his eyes and stared at him, pinning him to the bed without a touch. "Jack has many, many believers. But he is also very, very injured. We have theories why Sandy became grain of sand in dreamer's mind, but we don't know. Perhaps such a thing is what always happens to a Guardian, when hurt unto death."

No. No, he wasn't listening to this. Aster rolled back onto his side, back to North and nose pressed against Jack's shoulder, not listening so hard he about jumped out of his fur when North touched his arm again.

"The theory could be wrong," North said, softer than should have been possible.
"It is." His voice wobbled, cracking halfway through the short sentence. Aster swallowed, and clenched his eyes shut again. Jack wasn't going to - and anyways, how exactly would that work? Would he turn into a - a flake of snow drifting through the air, until Easter? Or a snowball, first snowball after - after - and then out pops Jack Frost?

Insanity.

It wasn't going to happen, anyways.

Jack was going to be just fine.

Jack wasn't fine. The stab wound had gotten an infection, and the winter spirit radiated heat like a furnace. Yet despite the fever, Jack wasn't sweating; he just lay there, cheeks flushed an unhealthy red, the rest of him paler than ever, each breath a struggle.

The yeti had him on a ventilator. The mask looked very strange, the machine puffing like a bellows as it forced air into Jack's lungs and then back out again.

Easter was getting closer and closer. Aster should be planting the egg-plants, at the very least. Restore what'd been destroyed. But he didn't move. The yeti could do it, if they were so worried. He didn't care.

North kept stopping by and talking about Easter. Aster kept telling him to go away.

When North talked, he couldn't hear Jack's heartbeat. The ventilator tried to drown it out, but Aster's ears were good, and he was focused.

Jack's heart still beat.

Aster kept one hand on Jack's chest, just to the side of the -

Jack's heart still beat.

He was still alive.

He'd get better.

Jack did not get better.

Aster remained curled up on the bed, arm and leg numb from the hard mattress, sheets scratchy even through his fur. He… hurt. Distantly, in a way that was only vaguely physical, he hurt. Deep inside, his ribs ached when he breathed, the muscles of his chest seemed cramped and torn. It was. Unimportant.

Short, blunt fingers combed through the fur on his neck. He ignored it. The touching. Comfort. Not for him. Shouldn't be.

He didn't want it.

They were the wrong fingers anyways.
Then Sandy tugged on his fur, sharp enough it hurt, mattered. Aster groaned, and rolled over onto his back.

His numb arm and leg immediately burst into pins and needles. It hurt. Which was only right and proper, because -

No. No, he wasn't, he wouldn't think about it. He -

Sandy waved his arms, and then yanked on Aster's fur again. Aster glared at him, but gave up after a few seconds. Too much effort.

The Dreamweaver folded his arms, expression warning, before he began to sign. He was doing his equivalent to baby talk; Aster had no difficulty following along.

Easter. What was it going to take to convince these people to realize he didn't care? Someone else could do it. He wasn't. It didn't matter if kids lost belief in him, because at least that way -

Sandy reached over and smacked him in the mouth. Aster blinked. He hadn't even realized he'd been talking.

*That was obvious, Sandy 'said'. When did you last sleep?*

"Can't remember," Aster croaked. Probably same time he'd last had a drink of water. Curling up, miserable and hurting, zoning out but not sleeping, obviously didn't count.

Sandy huffed, looking exasperated and annoyed. *You are missing a point, a very important one. I am a Guardian who died, and came back. Jack died -* Aster flinched, but Sandy continued without pause, - *But that does not mean he won't come back. And what is Easter?*

Easter? "My holiday." Sandy offered him a glass of water from the bedside table. Aster stared at it, and then sat up. It tasted… good, and that felt wrong, that something should taste good at this time. He continued to sip slowly, mouth and throat slowly relearning what it was to be moist, instead of dry.

*It is considered, at least in North America, to be the first true day of spring. What happens when spring returns to the world?*

Aster scowled, and rubbed his forehead. Why…


"But Jack's… he doesn't bring spring. It's the blokes and sheilas that bring spring that return." And yet. Aster had to set the glass down, his fingers were starting to tremble. And then shake. "Jack's winter, spring's when winter's on retreat."

*Perhaps, Sandy allowed, but what else happens? New…?*

Aster rolled his eyes. "Jack's not a babe in arms."

*Fine, so spring's rebirth isn't quite as important as something else happening that day. Or rather, night. Past midnight, technically Monday.*

Oh. The sort of thing Aster didn't much like thinking about. After all, it was one thing for… for a human to become a spirit the way North had, or a great many hero-types; by going out and doing the impossible. It was also not uncommon for there to be stories of things, gods, and for someone to…
sort of embody them in life, and become them in death.

But generally speaking the religion came before the spirit that… supported that religion. The followers of Christ had gone a bit backwards about it, in Aster's opinion, but it did have one useful side effect.

"Easter Monday. You don't think…?"

*It did for me.* Sandy poured the glass full of water, and offered it again. He kindly didn't mention the tears standing in Aster's eyes, not even when they spilled over and rolled down his cheeks. *Failing belief in one results in failing belief in all. We have done what we can, and now the next big holiday falls to you. Besides, is not the belief that Jack will return, when spring rolls in?*

It did. Was.

Aster sipped at the water, and nodded. "Gotta hope," he whispered. Sandy patted him on the shoulder.

Hope, and believe. Get his eggs done, and then… "Burgess Lake's probably the best place to wait."

Sandy nodded, and smiled faintly. *We'll be there with you,* he promised.

"Thank you." He needed it. Needed them. Now, if this was going to be done… "How long until Easter?"

Chapter End Notes

I've been covering a co-worker's night shift, so please let me know if you see any typos.
I've reviewed the chapter before posting, but my brain is currently mush.
"And no sign of Pitch?" Aster stared down at the eggs, every last one painted and marching towards the tunnels. Not for the first time, he fought off a wave of déjà vu; Easter, Jack missing (gone, gone - no, he'd come back) and Pitch Black on the loose. All of his hope bound up in Easter and the renewal of spring.

Difference was, this time Jack hadn't been stolen away. (Technically…) And when Jack returned - he would, he had to believe that - they were going after Pitch again with hand grenades and torches.

If the Nightmare King hadn't abandoned his own lair, Aster would've killed him already. Maybe that was why the others had kept him constant company. Not the crying jags that took up hours, not the way Aster forgot to eat or sleep, not even the way he'd taken to plucking at the fur on his forearms and thighs, leaving raw and bloody patches of skin. No, it was probably just because if they didn't keep watch on him, he'd kill Pitch and then Mother Nature would be pissed at them.

Not to mention there'd be a new Nightmare King somewhere. Apparently that was a bad thing, or at least North said it was. Something about spies and keeping one's enemies close.

Aster didn't care. Pitch had - and therefore, he needed to die.

"Not yet," Tooth assured him. "And with the tweaks done to the tunnels, he won't be able to get at them."

Aster wrinkled his nose. Motion sensitive lights. He didn't know whether to thank North, or strangle the bloke with his own beard. Damn ugly things. "I reckon."

Tooth reached over and caught his hand, before he could start plucking at his forearm. "Now then," she murmured. "You don't want to do that. Twenty-four hours, isn't it? And Jamie will be at the lake with his new grand-baby, that should secure things."

Right. Didn't want to worry Jack with the plucking. Because Jack would be back.

Return of spring or no, Jack would come back.

It was hard not to fret, though, as he turned back to the final details before Easter. The others could talk about resurrection myths and the return of lovers all they wanted, all he could think was that Jack was a North American spirit, and a winter spirit, and all the spring mythology he knew of involved the defeat of winter.

Just because Sandy had come back didn't mean Jack was guaranteed to.

Aster scooped up an egg and cuddled it close. He'd painted it blue and white, but then again he'd painted a lot of eggs blue and white over the years. That was hardly new. The lump in his throat, though, that was… that was different.

"Hope," he murmured, and set the egg down again. He had to hope, to believe. That was the first spell, after all, *I believe, I believe, I believe*. But for Aster, hope was stronger than belief, it had to be. It was why he hadn't given up on his people, of other survivors. Sure, everyone said they were dead, but there was no evidence of that, just heresy. And he wasn't going to trust heresy.
He rubbed his forehead, and then smoothed down the fur on one arm. There was an unsightly tuft of
loose fur right by the elbow, so he plucked it out. The bloody roots left a smear of red against the pad
of his thumb.

He had to hope. He had to believe.

Jack would come back.

It was approaching dawn on Easter Monday, and Jack wasn't back.

The old crew, Jack's first believers, had even enacted a snowball fight with the last, slushy patches of
snow. The moon was nearly full, a lopsided oblong that had hung low over the trees and then slid
quickly out of sight, as though it couldn't bear to watch.

An odd sentiment, Aster supposed. Manny didn't control the moon itself, he just lived in it.

And Jack wasn't back.

He wasn't coming back.

Aster hunched on the shore of Burgess Lake, Jack's Lake, Jamie's latest grandchild in his arms. Kid
was three going on twenty, always so serious and clinging to an almost ponderous dignity, so
determined adults were his peers that he preferred listening to them talk to playing with his fellow
preschool students. Jack had thought it hilarious and adorable, and was probably behind the kid's
current fascination with the weather.

The kid was currently asleep, one small fist clutching a handful of Aster's fur, the other tucked
thumb-in-mouth. He'd conked out explaining the tax system to Aster, made-up words slurring
together, fighting the inevitable as long as he could.

Aster traced the pad of one finger over the kid's cheek, chubby in the way of very small children,
skin soft and smooth. This one might've been Jack's favourite. Jamie's girl had named him Jackson,
after all.

Jack wasn't coming back.

He took a shallow, shuddering breath. Jack wasn't coming back. All the belief, all the hope in the
world, wasn't going to change that fact. The others had hung their hopes on Sandy, on the way he'd
died and come back, but Jack wasn't like Sandy. Hadn't been like. He'd been human, flesh and blood
and bone, and he'd gone slow and painful, not fast, not into corrupted sand that was still sand, that
had come from Sandy in the first place.

And spring, winter's defeat, how could that possibly mean Jack was coming back?

It didn't, it couldn't. Because Jack wasn't coming back.

The gathering's atmosphere had been almost party-like at the beginning, mid-afternoon when
everyone had gathered around. And then the enthusiasm and cheer had turned a little forced,
somewhat desperate.

Now, no one was talking. Everyone was quiet, mournful, aware but refusing to voice what they all
knew.

Over in the east, the first hints of sunrise were beginning to tint the sky gold.
Aster stood up. It hurt. Every step felt like a new piece of his heart was being torn away. But he took those steps anyways, crossing the grass to the baby's mother, and handed him over, careful with the tot. He handed the baby over, and started to shake.

"Bunny," she murmured, Jamie's girl, whose name he couldn't even remember. She was a widower, he remembered now; soldier's wife, had just gotten the news a few weeks after her boy had been born. There was a world of sympathy in her gaze, tears in her eyes, and he just. He couldn't.

"I - not now," he said, words forced out. Somehow. "I have to. Go."

"Bunny." Tooth now, and he couldn't look at her. He just couldn't deal with this.

He tapped open a rabbit hole, and dropped in, fast.

The tunnel was narrow and damp, lined in ferns and moss that constantly dripped water onto him. If he couldn't cry, apparently his tunnel would do it for him.

He made it to the Warren, to the egg fields only just touched with green, barely covering the black scarring in the earth. And beyond the fields, black hills and toppled carvings. He'd avoided a look through, because everything that mattered, everything personal had been in Jack's cabin and destroyed, or moved to North's guest room.

He started walking now.

Aster's footsteps kicked up the fine ash coating the ground, and it swirled around him, getting as high as his knees in places. From the thigh down he looked like he'd been dipped in a particularly cheap ink. Everything had been burned. The rocks were covered in char. Some had cracked from the heat, others looked like they'd come close to melting.

He reached a patch where he'd carved and painted the walls, back when he'd still thought the majority of his people alive, that he'd drawn the Fearlings and Nightmare Men and all the other monsters away after him, after the First Light. This patch had been his family, the squad he'd served with. His mother had stood next to his father, green fur and bright gold, and his squad had been done in their colours, blue and purple and red, all the hues of adult Pooka.

The paint was gone now. The carvings had crumbled and lay in shards on the floor.

Aster clenched a fist, and then slowly, with all the deliberation this act deserved, turned and started for the other side of the Warren.

There were defenses, and the fires hadn't penetrated them. The final defense, a quick scan of his eyes, and he was in.

He'd stored the remains of his old ship here. The metal had rotted away before mammals had even begun to evolve, most of the electronics following very soon after. A few things, though, had survived.

The first had been his old army trunk. He'd hauled his books and clothes and weapons around in that thing since the day he'd joined. Now, it held a few things he hadn't dared to remove from the Warren, and the protections it offered.

Aster knelt, and opened the trunk.

The first thing he pulled out was a weapon. It was in pieces - it'd been made to be disassembled - and he put it together, screwing everything in carefully, attaching the blade with even more care. Billions
of years since he'd used it, and it was still sharp enough to cut the wind.

The blade-tipped staff looked enough like a Japanese glaive to have been an especially decorated version. He couldn't remember the Pookan word, so he supposed 'glaive' was good enough. The blade was shaped like an elm leaf, long, curved edges coming to a sharp point; it was as long as his forearm. The staff as a whole was a few inches longer than he was tall.

Aster spun the glaive in his hands, the wood light and solid beneath his fingers, the blade turning into a silver-edged blur. He stopped, the staff ready in his hands. He set it down, and turned back to the chest.

Twin daggers, which he left sheathed. The belt, made of a golden coloured metal. Greaves and arm guards in the same, golden hue.

Moon-blessed blades were good against the shadows. Blades with the sun poured in them, though, were better.

There were other things still in the trunk, but they weren't weapons or armour, so he left them. Not important at the moment.

Aster pulled off his leather arm guards, more decorative than functional, and strapped on the metal. They were warm, and glowed faintly at the edges of his vision. He put on the belt, and hung the knives from it. He picked up the glaive, and took a moment to consider.

He had a few samples of Easter Chocolate in his pocket, the inevitable breakages that came when hundreds of thousands of eggs traveled through the tunnels. So that part was taken care of. But if he wanted to make something permanent…

Aster turned, and went further down the tunnel. Pitch had never been able to stand against the power of the First Light.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so you know how I said I post every Sunday? Apparently that was a lie - I managed to send myself the wrong chapter twice in a row. Also, considering the way work has been insanely busy (we are understaffed and getting swamped) I actually haven't written on Cabin in an age and a half. And yes, I will be working on it from home, but I honestly don't know if I'll be able to post next Sunday. It's been pretty crazy. FYI, I guess.
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Awareness returned slowly, akin to waking from a drugged sleep. In a way, that's exactly what it was. Exhaustion dragged at his limbs, turned his bones to lead and his muscles to twisted wax. His back... hurt. Sprouting an extra four arms had dislocated everything from shoulder blades to ribs, had twisted and pulled muscles, and then snapped everything back with casual disregard to little things like comfort and proper place. At some point he'd have to do his stretches, make sure everything had, indeed, been put back right and proper.

He was in a cave, and for several long minutes, that was about all he could figure. His eyes watered from the pain and were blurry with exhaustion, and all he could really make out were the dark walls and darker roof, and an odd, wavering light source.

Energy trickled back, a drop at a time, and Aster pushed up onto hands and knees. His spine popped and crackled, but things felt somewhat better after, so he kept going. He rested in seiza, hands on his knees, head bowed and shoulders curled.

He was missing something important, he knew he was, but he couldn't... think... Couldn't remember. Where... when was he? Last he remembered...

Fragments drifted to the surface of his thoughts, not in order. The first time he'd eaten - well, not chocolate, a Pookan herb, a coming of age ritual gone... off. A memory of rage, but who he was angry at and why, he didn't know. A place, familiar and not, covered in green and flowering plants, rock walls curving up and overhead, so high clouds drifted below the ceiling and around the stalactites. There was a sense that the green place had been dug and planted with his own hands, but surely that wasn't right. He was only one person, it'd take... centuries.

Strange. He remembered centuries. Living out in the wild, hand to mouth, not even making or using rough tools...

What had he been doing?

He remembered grief next, a pain that was entirely emotional, and he curled up around it, the wound fresh and new all over again. Aster gasped, and clenched his eyes shut against the tears. And oh, El-Ahrairah's mercy, the images. Bodies - oh, strewth, so many bodies.

More memories, not a trickle but a steady stream, as things began to slot back into place. He shuddered, as the three - bloody hell, three, he was insane - times he'd used the First Light snapped into vivid, terrifying clarity. Four, now, because -

Because -

But more memories came back, while he was chasing the one, and everything was coming back in order now. Earth. Watching life evolve, desperate and grieving and yes, in denial, because they couldn't be dead, they couldn't be dead, he wasn't the last -


Grief. Loss. The last, the last, no they're lying.
Watching the dinosaurs. The eggs were interesting. Plants, precursor to chocolate, twin from another planet to the Pookan herb. Sleeping, so much sleeping. Sleeping, and waking, and never aging. Not realizing, until he looked up to the sky and the stars had changed position, and the realization of age crashed into him.

Proper Pookan restraint shattered, decorum tossed to the four winds. He regretted it now, but it was important that he learnt his powers, that he discovered how to create a plague before humans evolved. Really, the meteor had been a good thing, the poor dinosaurs would've carked it from illness anyways… and the pyroclastic flow had been faster and more merciful than a bacteria that turned oxygen in the blood into poison.

Watching the mammals rise up and take over. Humans, clever little things, reminding him more and more of Pooka the longer he watched. Wrong shape, but inside, so very similar. The place, the people of Mu, Ombric's people who got mixed up with it, Easter Island. Giving up on the idea of a home, going back to the wild. Punishing himself, for surviving when no one else had. For not saving them. Easter, a drop of water to soothe the desert his soul had become. The other Guardians, friends he didn't deserve, but who wouldn't be pushed away.

Jack. Infuriating, delightful, beautiful. Who brought joy and comfort back into Aster's life, only for it to be snatched - oh, his memories were caught up to the present now - snatched away.

Aster kept his eyes clenched shut, hands fisted against his knees. He knew what he'd done. And why. Jack was gone. Pitch had killed him and Jack was gone and Aster had…

Aster had probably pissed off everyone, but he couldn't bring himself to regret it.

He opened his eyes, and blinked the water away. His vision was clearer, and he could make out his surroundings now.

Pitch's lair was darker and less eerie without all the fire. There was enough light to find his glaive with, but he was reluctant to pick it up. He was doubly reluctant to turn towards the light source; the First Light had done something to him, but damned if he could tell what. It was like a difference of two degrees in temperature, noticeable, but only if he focused. Until new marks grew in, or his fur changed colour again, he wouldn't know what had been done.

The air smelt of sulphur and heated stone, copper, and burnt sugar. Celestials had blood almost like humans, just… with a few quirks.

Aster looked around, a careful shifting of his gaze inch by inch. Blood only a few shades lighter than the rocks dried nearby, while his own was splattered around, a few drops here, a teaspoon or two there. His fur was matted down in places, but most of the wounds seemed to be closed over; from his extra arms, he supposed. Injuries to his extra arms always seemed to migrate to his two permanent ones, after, but half-healed. Shapeshifting was a strange and wonderful thing.

He froze when he caught sight of the body. Oh yes. Everyone would be quite upset. Pitch was, indeed, very dead.

"Long live the king," a woman drawled, stepping forward out of the shadows. Aster was too tired and sore to jump, but he did flinch.

Marzanna smiled, and smoothed down her skirts. She didn't look like she had, when she'd visited the pole. Then, she'd been a dark and mysterious beauty. Now she looked like the pretty young actress that would get cast as 'the girl next door' in American movies. It was jarring, particularly when she smiled and revealed a mouthful of shark-teeth.
"He can't live," Aster said, after a moment. "He's dead."

"Very true." Marzanna stopped beside the body, and nudged it with her toe. "Quite thorough, aren't you?"

Aster swayed, and then braced himself with one hand against the ground. "He killed Jack."

The winter spirit nodded, and left the body. She crouched down in front of Aster, and tipped his chin up with one hand. "Well, vengeance couldn't be done to a better person. There's a new ruler of Nightmare, of course."

… Ruler of? Pitch, for all his claims, had been ruled by. "You know who?"

Marzanna giggled, and stood up. "The best person for the job. Spirits of fear could not control Nightmare, of course, that is the ultimate source of their power. A seasonal can block it. But one of both fear and season…" She picked up his glaive, and gave it a quick twirl. "Fear to tap into the power, and the season to remain sane. It's a bit of a comedown from goddess and demon, but I'll take it."

He was too tired for this. "You're the new…?"

"Mm, yes. Fortunately for you. Winter really is the strongest against Nightmare. Then again, which side is staring into the abyss?" She offered him his glaive. "You can't stay here."

Aster nodded. He really couldn't. It took everything he had, though, to lift one hand and accept the glaive. He braced it against the ground, and got to his feet, swaying and leaning heavily on the weapon.

"I cannot touch the light," Marzanna said, even as she took him by the elbow. Aster focused on shuffling his feet in a vaguely forwards direction, and left the steering up to her.

"Dun wanna," he mumbled. The Light was right there, and he shivered at the heat. "Bag. Should be a bag."

"Mm. Here's one." She dropped his elbow and moved away several steps to pick the bag up, and offered it to him. Aster stared at it, and then nodded.

It was easy enough to get the First Light back into the bag. Almost suspiciously so. Marzanna took his elbow and guided him out of the now-dark cave.

Pitch was dead. He should feel happy about that, shouldn't he?

He just felt tired.

Aster closed his eyes, and stumbled after Marzanna. He'd feel something later. After he'd slept.

He was just too tired.

Sandy wasn't the type to worry overmuch, or at all. It was, he maintained, an aspect of being a star pilot, which most people seemed to mix up with being the actual meteor. Which was absolutely ridiculous, the difference between Shooting Stars and meteors was, well, like the difference between a sailing ship and a thrown rock. He would have tried to explain, but it was hard enough communicating through pictograms and different language symbols what he preferred for lunch. Where star pilots came from and what their purpose had been… Perhaps best to just leave it.
As a star pilot, Sandy was rather solitary by nature. He was a bit more gregarious than most of his kind had been, as witness his friendships with the other Guardians. He didn't flinch from loud noises. Dealing with people was a bit exhausting, so he did sleep more here on earth than he'd done piloting his shooting star, but he was old and at an age most star pilots ended up retiring, anyways. He'd earned a nap.

So no, he wasn't much inclined to worry. He was old enough to know how important most immediate concerns were - not very, was the answer - and experienced enough that explosions and hysteria didn't catch him by surprise.

On the other hand, the few things that could make him worry… Well.

He worried, indeed.

Like right now. Sandy was on duty, watching Bunny detox. Again. The Pooka was good at getting his hands on chocolate, thankfully the kind that left him in a state halfway between drugged and drunk… and extremely weepy. In the past two months, he'd eaten chocolate three times, and the detoxing was only getting harder on his system.

It was not comfortable watching his friend act like this. And yet, in retrospect, he couldn’t see any way to have prevented this outcome.

Sandy knew, better than anyone, how badly Bunny took grief. He was hopeful, yes, but his dreams tended to be desperate and sparse, except when Sandy meddled. He tried not to meddle too much, because Bunny got upset when he did it. Things had been better, recently; Jack could cheer up a stone. But now Jack was gone, and Bunny had killed Pitch.

Sandy wasn't sure how he felt about that. Kozmotis had been a friend, but Pitch had been an enemy. An enemy longer than he'd been a friend, in fact. Common sense dictated feeling relief at the loss of an enemy, and yet…

There had always been that hope that one day, Kozmotis would overcome Pitch and Sandy would have his friend back. It had to be some form of irony that the Guardian of Hope would take action that would destroy Sandy's hope, but at the same time he could not begrudge Bunny his actions. The Pooka, to the best of Sandy's knowledge, had never encountered Kozmotis before his transformation into Pitch, and the Nightmare King had killed or destroyed nearly everything Bunny cared about.

Sandy shook his head, the action doing nothing about the uncomfortable thoughts whirling about his head. Bunny's doings had caused quite the upheaval among the spirits of the world, and instead of helping the Guardians where they could act…

No, that was uncharitable. Bunny was grieving, and to make matters worse he'd taken chocolate. He was ill. And yet…

Sandy visualized the thought as one of those squishy balls, and squeezed it between his hands. When he finished squeezing the thought into nothing, he looked up, and hesitated. Bunny was awake, eyes half open and ears limp against the pillow.

He waved a greeting. Bunny sighed, and looked away.

"I'm not sorry," the Pooka mumbled.

Sandy squashed down another ball, of annoyance this time. He'd never thought Bunny would be sorry. And anyways, the dreamweaver did understand why Bunny had done what he did. He didn't necessarily agree with it, but he understood.
Bunny eyed him, a hint of his usual attitude, before slumping down again. He plucked at his forearm, and didn't even fight when Sandy used a tendril of sand to pull his hand away. "Think I could use some choky, mate."

Sandy shook his head in the negative. 'Cold turkey', as North called it, wasn't comfortable to Bunny, but detox had to be worse. Although what a chilled bird associated with an autumn holiday had to do with getting Bunny off chocolate…

It had to be a turn of phrase.

Bunny growled, and Sandy focused on him. The Pooka looked terrible, fur patchy from plucking and stress-shedding, gaunt from how he couldn't keep much of anything down. He was currently on all fours, bristling like a grumpy dog.

"Sandy. Just a bit. That's all. Just to stop this pounding …" Bunny clutched his head with one hand, and hissed in pain.

Sandy shook his head again. No chocolate. And if Bunny stopped fighting them about it, he would feel much better.

"I need it!" Bunny roared, before collapsing, a puppet with the strings cut. "I need ta stop thinking, Sandy… I need chocolate."

The dreamweaver sighed, and hovered a little lower.

He really shouldn't have.

Bunny sprang into action, grabbing Sandy about the waist with one arm and then flung Sandy aside, towards the bed. Sandy floundered, flipped upside down, and flattened his sands against the door, and after a second's thought, the window. No matter how Bunny clawed, the sand resisted his efforts, and finally he slumped down and keened. The sound was one only a Pooka could make, wavering through several different pitches, all of them fit to draw tears from anyone hearing it.

Even Sandy drooped, for all that he didn't have tear ducts.

Bunny pawed at the door, and looked up at Sandy, the very picture of abject misery. A calculated picture, Sandy knew; Bunny was currently consumed by the need to drown his sorrows in chocolate, and never mind too much would end up killing him.

Sandy firmed his will, and lifted Bunny up, his sands flowing around the Pooka. Bunny hissed, but went tamely back to the bed. The activity had apparently worn him out, as he draped limply over the covers, eyes gone dull and blank once more.

Sandy resumed his prior spot in the middle of the room, and sighed. It had been two months already, and keeping Bunny from chocolate was wearing at them all. The fear spirits were agitating against the change in leadership, though Sandy hadn't thought they'd even had leadership. Perhaps it was only that the new Nightmare King, whoever that was, was determined to lead.

There wasn't much the Guardians could do, unfortunately. Most of the seasonal spirits were staying out of the mess, spring and summer being 'easy' seasons where the lengthened days and warmer weather kept fear weak. But what of autumn, of Halloween? And then what of winter? Autumn and winter spirits tended to be as much fear as their season, from what Sandy had seen, even if it was only defiance of fear.

He didn't know. They would just have to deal with the problems as they came up, and hope they
were equal to the task.

Chapter End Notes

Yes! It's posted! And I will probably never write fanfic at work again, simply because when it works well, it REALLY works well... but most of the time it doesn't. -shrug-

Anyways, yes, one chapter yet to go. And then I will take. a. BREAK from this universe. I have a few other series to finish up - Werewolf Jack and Assassins Jack come to mind, and I've been trying to poke in that direction for a while. Plus a few one-off chaptered fics I'd like to finish off as well, before I start anything new. Things should remain exciting!
Did you seriously think I'd do it? Permanently?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was cold, and dark, but he wasn't afraid.

Cranky, but not afraid.

The ice overhead melted at a touch, but held firm as he crawled out of the water, the leather and wool of his clothes frosting over once he was in the air.

There was no handy staff near at hand, so once he was out of the water he staggered over to a tree, and leaned against it as he focused on catching his breath.

Golden sunlight shot through the tree branches, turning the leaves into a riot of gold and ruby. He eyed them with misgiving, and then looked around.

Right. Figured he'd end up here. Now, time to start poking around…

Aster hissed when Tooth slapped his hand down, but left his forearm alone. He was… tired. Everything hurt. His head pounded with a need for chocolate, to the point that he had a constant migraine and nausea. But he was better than a month before, and much better than the month before that, and on. At least now he could be grateful his friends were spending the time and energy to get him healthy.

Chocolate. It was very bad for a Pooka, and he regretted every last crumb he'd had this past year. He could have killed Pitch without it, he was sure, but it'd seemed like such a good idea at the time…

Grief could make almost anything seem like a good idea. Especially grief mixed with shattered hopes.

Well, he'd gotten it under control. He grieved, still, and likely would for the rest of his life, but he didn't feel like it would break him.

No, that was the headache.

Damn withdrawal.

"When will she get here?" he asked, peering around Tooth at North, who'd gotten the missive. The crow that had brought the note was still perched on the man's hat, looking as smug as an overgrown soot-ball could.

"She?" Tooth asked. "We're meeting the new Nightmare King."

Aster opened his mouth, and then hesitated. He squinted at Tooth. "That'd be Marzanna."

Tooth shook her head. "We're going to talk to the Nightmare King," she said, stressing the final
"What woman would want to be a king?"

"A European one," North said, valiantly ignoring both the crow and Sandy's efforts at dislodging it or luring it away. "Queens in Europe make heir and spare and look pretty, and nothing else."

The fairy queen at his side looked incensed. Aster edged a few cautious steps away, and looked around. The field they were meeting in, up on the side of a Swiss mountain, was nice enough, and showing the first signs of a northern autumn. He knew that normally he'd have been focused in on the shade of yellow-green the grass had turned, or the ruby of the deciduous trees and bushes... but as it was, the most he could manage was a bit of appreciation for how pretty it all ways.

He sighed. He'd relearnt enthusiasm for both horticulture and painting after his people had been lost. There might have been a period where he'd mostly ignored it, but he hadn't given it up completely. Given time, he'd admire the scenery again.

Given time, he might look at something like this, a pretty view, and not wonder what Jack would think about it.

Tooth and North had progressed to bickering behind him, the argument good natured and more to pass the time than anything. They'd arrived early, the others apparently unaware of Marzanna's promotion. A strange thought; Aster knew, and he'd been next to unconscious when she'd told him.

Off to the west, the sky was getting dark. Fast. Too distant to tell if it was clouds or not, but... "Think that's her?" he asked, and inclined his head towards the darkness.

Sandy formed a pair of binoculars, and peered through them. Aster shook his head. Lenses made out of sand shouldn't work, but clearly they did. Only Sandy.

Sandy put down his binoculars, the pair crumbling back into unformed sand, and nodded.

"Right," he said, and straightened up. "Oy, yobos, she's coming."

He'd survived losing everything once before. He'd survive it again.

The headache... that was another matter.

Damn chocolate.

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True night had fallen by the time he reached town, the plant life thinning out to trees lining the streets and whatever bushes and flowers were planted around the houses. And the lawns. One mustn't forget the lawns, because the house owners certainly wouldn't.

It all looked... a bit unexpected, for a time to wake up. There wasn't a single snowflake on the ground. The leaves, while colourfull, were still on the trees. The grass had barely yellowed. And while he could tell the temperature had dropped from summer's unreasonable heat, the few humans he saw were walking around in sweaters, the only hats were stylish, and there wasn't a glove to be seen anywhere.

Not that he was going to complain, early was definitely not a bad thing, but still.

Weird.

The house he wanted still had lights on, so he circled around to the back. Curtains had been drawn across the sliding glass doors, but he could hear voices and the curtains didn't block out the light, just
the view.

He pounded on the door, and waited.

Jamie pulled the curtain back, and then his jaw dropped. If it had been physically possible, his eyes would've dropped out of his head, they were bulging so much.

Jack grinned, and waved hello.

"I have only just been able to make the time," Marzanna said, accepting her crow back from North. She hadn't been associated with the birds before, to Aster's knowledge, but perhaps it was new, something to do with her new title. "Fear spirits aren't the sort to happily bow to authority, so it's been one fight after the other."

Aster leaned against North, in lieu of any handy trees or posts. He felt tired, his stores of energy used up and not yet replenished. "How's that working out?"

"Well enough, for the moment. Those spirits that are pure fear-eaters know to toe the line, now." Marzanna shrugged. "I am and will always be winter first, so that's going to be a problem in the long run. Personally I'd like to just forbid them from frightening people, but it's how they eat. And it would be a bit hypocritical, considering how many winter spirits are cannibalistic in one form or another."

"Flesh and energy, wasn't it?" Tooth asked, though the tone was more rhetorical than anything. "Even just preventing them from killing anyone will help immensely."

"And fear itself isn't bad." Marzanna stroked the crow's back, and sighed. "It's only the abuse of fear... well. I needn't lecture. Have you noticed anything odd with the weather?"

Aster straightened up. "Odd, how?"

The Nightmare King shook her head, braids sliding back and forth over her shoulders. "I'm not sure how to... No. I do know. Three, almost four centuries back, in winter. The weather patterns became... neater. Less chaotic. And now the autumn weather patterns are doing the same."

The Pooka turned away for a moment, letting the others ask clarifying questions. Was everything going to remind him of Jack?

When he looked back, Marzanna was regarding him with sympathy. "I'm sorry."

"It's..." It wasn't fine. He couldn't say it was fine. "I'll live."

The woman stared off into space, and then smirked. "I dare say you will, but... Well. I wanted to touch base with you, especially as we're entering into a bit more of a dangerous time of year. Even the best of autumn spirits seem touched by fear. Harvest and hunting is only waylaying enough supplies to make out the winter, after all."

"Are there any alliances you can make?" North suggested. "Powerful autumn spirits?"

Marzanna snorted. "One - Easter Bunny, sit down, you're starting to sway. Any moment now you'll fall. And two, apart from a few hunt lords, there aren't any powerful autumn spirits. A few winter spirits do edge into that season, simply because their country or culture doesn't actually have autumn as we know it, but they haven't any authority."
“That seems unfortunate.” Tooth hesitated, and then squinted up at the sky. “What are those clouds doing?”

Overhead, though at a bit of a distance over the plains, the clouds were swirling and darkening. Aster just shook his head; he hadn’t the foggiest, though at least he could make a guess about Australian weather. This, obviously, wasn’t that. No foam, for one thing.

“Does Switzerland have hurricanes?” North asked, and was promptly smacked upside the head. Sandy began his version of yelling, large, flashing images that threatened to burst apart in North’s face. Aster raised one eyebrow at the sight; that wasn’t physically possible, Switzerland did get tornadoes last he’d checked, and also, that was probably illegal as well as physically impossible. Amusing, though.

“Sandy, of course Switzerland gets tornadoes. The last one was in twenty-fifteen.”

Aster looked over at Tooth. “How do you even know that?”

Marzanna cleared her throat. “I believe it’s coming towards us.”

Confusion after teleporting was normal. Everyone said so. So Jack wasn’t too worried about the things that weren’t making sense. Give it a few more hours awake and everything would snap back into place - again, everyone said so. Sure, he’d spent an embarrassingly long time remembering how to fly and an even worse time remembering the past three centuries - he still had a few missing patches, though the emotions were still there, and honestly he doubted the seventeenth century could have been all that interesting anyways. Horrifically mortifying in some way, but probably very boring - but he had the important stuff all down.

Fight with Pitch, gone bad, everyone probably thought he was dead. At least he hadn’t pulled a Ded Moroz and left his clothes behind.

There was something a little… off, though, about the weather. Jack was pretty sure the autumn winds had never been this responsive to him before. Not that he hadn’t managed, with his wind, but he was currently flying unaided and that was… probably strange?

He shook his head, and arrowed in on the rocky things ahead of him. Mountains. Yup, still a little confused. It’d clear up. Everyone said.

Thunder rumbled behind him, the clouds tagging at his heels like surly lambs. That was familiar, the lambs, not the clouds… or maybe it was the clouds?

Oh, he didn’t know. What did it really matter, anyways? Everyone had gathered on the side of some mountain, somewhere… Germany wasn’t it, though it was nearby. Maybe? All the local government buildings seemed to have red and white flags in front of them, a lot like the Red Cross logo, only backwards. White cross, red flag. It was very pretty, even if he kept looking around for the relief efforts.

Time to surprise everyone with his speedy return. Jack grinned, and flipped over midair until he was falling at an angle, feet towards the ground. The wind caught him a dozen feet away from impact, swirling around him like a nervous, baby tornado, before setting him down with surprising gentleness.

He dismissed the wind with a gesture, and grinned. The Big Four. And… Marzanna? “Uh, hi,” he said, and squinted at the unexpected lady. “Sorry I’m late.”
Aster touched Jack’s cheek again, checking, testing, and felt warm skin beneath his fingertips. Here. Alive. Confused, but with a dawning realization in his eyes, in the way he held himself. How the lines of his shoulders tightened, squared off, as he sat straighter.

“How long?” Jack asked, and caught Aster’s hand in his own. Jack’s fingers were warm, at least compared to how cold the Pooka felt.

“Six months.” North shook his head, and muttered under his breath. Probably something like “I can’t believe this,” he’d done nothing but repeat that line for five minutes when Jack had first appeared.

“Six… All summer, then.” Jack stared up into space, mouth pinched tight. “No wonder Jamie was so surprised to see me.”

Tooth laughed, and then clapped her hands over her mouth. “Sorry, sorry. We thought - you’d died, and then you didn’t come back.”

Jack looked confused, and glanced over at Marzanna. Aster bristled; he was right there, after all, Jack still held his hand, he’d explain.

Jack squeezed Aster’s hand, and tilted his head.

“You died some few months before Easter,” Marzanna said, lips twitching in what might have been amusement. “And everyone thought you would be reborn on that date.”

Jack tilted his head the other way, and looked back at the Guardians. “Last time I checked, my name is Jack Frost, not Jesus Christ.” He paused, and added, “Or Sanderson Snoozle.” He squeezed Aster’s hand again. “So, how’d I come back?”

The Nightmare King raised her eyebrows. “How am I supposed to know? With very few exceptions, someone who dies stays dead. And there are even fewer people who can raise the dead -”

“Manny,” Jack said. He shifted closer to Aster, and let go of Aster’s hand. He couldn’t help the little hitch in his breath, and then Jack wrapped one arm around his waist, and everything was better. Almost okay. “He did it once before.”

Aster wrapped his arms around Jack’s shoulders and clung.

“Whoa, slow down Sandy, I can’t read when you go that fast.” Aster looked up and over; Sandy flashed through his images a little faster than his normal speed, fast enough everyone else was focusing on the symbols. They weren’t translating on the fly, not that most spirits could do that with the Sandman’s method of communication.

“Manny doesn’t have that power,” Aster said. The idea was… If Manny could bring one person back to life, why not more? There were plenty of people who’d -

Sandy shook his head in the negative, and waved his arms in circles. After a minute, he began signing again, slower. Manny, Jack, a sign for power…

“Only under certain circumstances?” Aster translated, Jack shifting to cuddle back against his chest. “What circumstances?”

“First time, I’d just saved my sister from falling through the ice,” Jack offered.

Marzanna laughed. “I believe we are all missing something. None of us were ordinary before we
became spirits. And as many extraordinary people there are, only a handful a millenia join our ranks. Perhaps it is only that the Man in the Moon can affect those people, and no others.”

“Then how’d he manage it this time?” Jack asked, and then shrugged. “Wait, autumn. It’s Octobre, isn’t it?”

“Halloween is two weeks away,” Marzanna agreed. “Not to mention all the other Day of the Dead holidays around now. I wonder if it has anything to do with the weather…?”

Jack twisted, and looked up at Aster, then around at the rest of them. “If Manny’s given me autumn as well, I’m going to have to kill someone,” he grumbled.

Only Marzanna looked approving.

Jack folded his sweater and set it on top of the dresser, every movement carefully precise and controlled.

Because otherwise, his hands would shake. His hands would shake, and the tremors would move up to his arms, his shoulders would hunch and the jitters would move through his core, and after that he’d fall apart.

He’d died.

And come back.

Again.

Shouldn’t it have been old hat by now? This was twice he’d died and come back. At this rate he was going to have more lives than the proverbial cat.

“Jack?”

Right, not alone, and for a second he felt nothing but resentment for that little fact. Which wasn’t fair to him, to Bunny, to anyone. If he’d been alone he’d have been angry about that, but having company meant he had to put on a good face…

Wait. No. He didn’t.

This was Bunny.

And the wall was frosted over.

“Sorry,” he said, and turned away from his sweater, from the frost, from the way his hands wanted to shake. “I don’t… it’s a lot to sink in.”

Bunny looked worried, and far too thin. The fur on his arms was patchy, the skin that showed covered in scabs. Tooth had told him what was up, so at least he didn’t have to worry about mange.

“You right then?”

“I’d say no worries, but…” Yeah. Worries. He rubbed his hands together. “No staff, I’ve been dead for six months, and I keep frosting everything over, so I’ll have to go with my control being… less than complete.” Bunny kept staring at him, the fur on his cheeks… well, his head looked a lot narrower without all that fluff, and his eyes bigger. Not a bad look, exactly, if it had been by choice and not illness. Or whatever Pooka termed withdrawal from chocolate.
“The staff’s that important?” Bunny asked. One thing at a time, good idea. Jack should probably pay attention to that.

“I guess. I mean, I always figured I couldn’t do anything without it…” He considered that, as he crossed over to the bed. As carefully as he’d dealt with his sweater, he just left his pants on the floor in a heap. They were leather, it wasn’t like they’d wrinkle. Not that wrinkles were bad, exactly, just… not the point. “When Pitch broke my staff that time, it hurt and I was grounded until I fixed it. Bet you anything having the staff burned did more damage than the stab wound.”

The stab wound through his heart. Good thing he was a winter spirit and had that fancy healing, because when it came to wounds, that wasn’t anywhere close to the worst. But he hadn’t healed at all… because he hadn’t had his staff?

“But I can do everything now.” The bed was soft, the sheets a little chilly until he wiggled over to snuggle into Bunny. The Pooka was all sharp angles under his fur, which was definitely new and unwelcome. Still, the cuddles were good, and helped with the whole ‘shaking’ thing.

“Maybe your powers have developed?” Bunny suggested, and turned his head to nuzzle into Jack’s hair. He sighed, body going lax with exhaustion. “Is it anything we can sort out tonight?”

Jack yawned. “Nah. Though, if you wake up frosted over…”

“That’s what blankets are for,” Bunny mumbled, seconds before passing out. Jack grinned, a little, at the familiarity. He could count on one hand the number of times it’d taken Bunny time to get to sleep, and still have fingers left over. Jack smoothed a hand over Bunny’s side, and then shifted to adjust the blankets over them. He’d have to get the lamp…

A stray spot of colour caught his attention when he leaned over the Pooka. He checked, because anything that shade was either fresh blood or paint dripping from the ceiling…

Neither. Bunny had a tuft of fur, just behind the top line of his shoulder. It was red, the eye-searing crimson of firetrucks and emergency lights everywhere. It was just a little stiffer than the fur around it, like the guard hairs Bunny had apparently shed out and had yet to regrow.

After a moment, Jack shrugged and turned off the bedside lamp. He could ask Bunny about it in the morning.

There was a lot for them to do in the morning. So he’d better get some sleep, he’d need it.

Chapter End Notes

Welp! That's right, this thing is done - for now. I do have the continuation (technically, supposed to be all one fic, but it got away from me and turned HUGE, as these things do, so... breaking it up into two fics. Besides, I need a break.) in the wings, but right now... Yeah, done.

So yes. There's things unanswered. That's because, when I get back to the continuation (A Heart, A Future) they'll be in that fic.

In the meantime, I think it's a toss up on whether I'll finish off the Assassins 'verse or the werewolf one...
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!